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## **UNDERSTANDING PARTNERSHIP APPROACHES: THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE NEW ZEALAND DEFENCE COLLEGE (NZDC)**

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### **Introduction**

I work in the Defence Force at the New Zealand Defence College (NZDC) as a learning designer. I developed these ideas when studying for my Postgrad Certificate in Tertiary Teaching and Learning at Massey University. It was important for me to understand how partnership works, in order to explore this approach within the NZDC. I found the concept of staff-student partnership complex, ambiguous, and sometimes contentious. For example, even the number of terms used to signify this partnership, such as engagement, student voice, collaboration, empowerment, and co-creation, generates further debate. I liked Woolmer et al.'s definition of partnership as "the ways in which students are empowered by institutions to shape their learning experiences" (Woolmer et al., p.17).

In this essay, I summarise my understanding of learning partnership and group this into four categories. First, I look at some partnership-generated course design, and then explore staff/student involvement in assessments. Then I analyse partnership through pedagogic consultancy. Finally, I finish with some examples of engagement through project work and learning events. I then look into some ways we, at the New Zealand Defence College (NZDC), integrate partnership in our unique context.

### **Course Design**

Partnership in course design is a key element of the staff-student partnership concept. Partnership in course design defines students as "pedagogical co-designer[s] who share responsibility for designing learning and teaching" (Bovill, Cook-Sather, Felten, Millard, & Moore-Cherry, 2015, p. 119). In most examples of engagement, students' roles are limited to simpler forms of evaluation, and it is rare for learners to be involved in curriculum design, which has always been considered the role of more senior staff (Flint, Harrington, & Healey, 2014, p. 48). Many staff comments from studies affirm that this type of collaboration was a new experience for them, and initially outside of their comfort zone.

Woolmer, et al. (2016) investigated course design partnership in the creation of a science skills course at the University of Glasgow in 2013. The first part of this partnership involved surveying students for their views on key skills required for the course and then offering them the chance to take part in focus group interviews. Second, a small group of students were chosen to build learning outcomes and develop course materials over a six-week period. Personal reflections from staff and students revealed that experiences were generally positive. Teachers and students valued working alongside one another, and Woolmer et al. (2016, p. 20) reported that the teachers welcomed the removal of traditional *them* and *us* barriers. This is relevant to learning because students also found the more informal working relationship to be a very positive experience and were pleasantly surprised with the level of trust and power sharing. Another positive outcome for staff and students was the quality and volume of teaching materials produced, with staff noting that "student-generated material [was] exemplary" and "little additional staff effort was required to make the material ready for use" (Woolmer et al., 2016, p. 21). As it was the first programme of its kind, institutional support

structures were not always available, and a down side of the collaboration was that the project required extra time from staff and students. Staff, however, found that time was recovered by not having to develop course materials. Another point raised by this collaboration was the lack of explicit discussion around the expectations of the project. Students stated that they would have appreciated some initial guidance regarding what was expected of them. Again, this was likely to be a result of the project being a new initiative.

I explored another example of students partnering at Elon University, North Carolina, USA. Mihans et al. (2008) report many positive experiences from student involvement in redesigning a Classroom Management for Elementary Teachers course. After a team of faculty formed the scope, students were invited to apply to be part of the course design team. Staff were pleasantly surprised with the number of student applications which gave the project momentum from the beginning. A major lesson learnt in this project was how to deal with differences in thinking between staff and students. Mihans et al. (2008, p. 4) state that “[t]he students concentrated almost exclusively on the practical considerations of new teachers, while the faculty were more concerned with the underlying principles and theories.” This issue turned out to be central to many problems the staff were facing and led to the realisation that staff had not always been listening to students in past collaborations. Mihans et al. (2008, p. 5) go on to admit that staff had not appreciated that students were subject matter experts on being college students. The process of choosing the course’s core textbook was a turning point in this issue; after much discussion, the students’ recommendation for a more practical text was accepted, and staff realised they had taken steps toward a real form of partnership. This recommendation illustrated the importance of students’ input in the material they would be learning and ultimately assessed on.

## **Assessment**

Staff-student partnership in developing assessments was the next area I investigated. Lorente and Kirk (2013, p. 77-78) noted that one of the reasons why assessment has traditionally been the domain of staff is because “assessment is an integral feature of the work of all Higher Education institutions...in universities, assessment is mostly high stakes in the sense that it is the mechanism by which students are able to progress through their courses.” Deeley and Bovill (2015) wrote about experiences at a small Scottish university where students worked with the teacher of two, final-year, undergraduate courses to co-create a range of assessment and feedback elements. This included partnering to create essay titles, marking criteria, formative and summative exams, and a peer review system. One of the reasons for their study was to highlight that assessment should be orientated for learning and that students’ learning is enhanced by improving their level of assessment knowledge (Deeley & Bovill, 2015). This translated to positive outcomes for the students as their assessment literacy was enhanced by their active involvement in developing assessments. Another positive result was an increase in motivation to pass a course as a result of being involved in its assessment. Due to having a say in how work was graded, students also reported increased engagement (Deeley & Bovill, 2015, p. 9). One interesting point noted by Deeley and Bovill was that “assessment is perhaps a more difficult area in which to achieve the genuine equality implied by partnership, where staff still hold final decision making power over grades” (2015, p. 10). Yet, it could be argued that even though it does not give them genuine equality in the partnership when collaborating on assessment, it does provide them greater insight into why and how they are being assessed.

Students' uncertainty about being involved in creating assessments is a theme taken up by Robert A. Francis. To investigate this theory, in 2008 he conducted research involving undergraduate students at Kings College in London. Francis found that receptivity to student-developed assessment increased from the first to third year of study, but not across all courses. He went on to say that, even in the final year of study, not all students embraced this empowerment. Francis also recommended that, when students become more involved, they need to be gradually introduced to partnership in this form to avoid uncertainty or anxiety (Francis, 2008, p. 553). In another example Rapke (2016), found that students experienced a more in-depth approach to learning as a result of being involved in creating their final closed-book maths exam. It seems the process of having to create questions helped students to view maths differently. Another advantage noted by Rapke (2016) was that, by preparing them in advance, students felt the partnership was helping them avoid "cramming" at the last minute as the partnership involvement was more structured than their study schedule may have otherwise been, and was reminding them of key concepts along the way. Lorente and Kirk (2013) explored self and peer assessments and reported that students were not always motivated by self or peer assessments, especially in the case of summative assessments, as they had an expectation that staff would write these. The authors cautioned this type of assessment needs practice, suggesting that to be successful students need to understand their teachers' expectations.

### **Pedagogical consultants**

The partnership of students and teachers in assessment development naturally leads into a discussion of students' engagement with faculty as pedagogical consultants (Cook-Sather, 2015, p. 1). The SaLT programme (Students as Learners and Teachers) at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges gives a thorough account of this kind of partnership, where staff and students "engage with one another in structured dialogue" around many elements of the staff-student relationship (Cook-Sather, 2014, p. 32). The theoretical underpinnings talked about in this reading are common to many of the other studies, and Cook-Sather (2014, p. 32-33) uses terms, such as "bring student voice into higher education," "a commitment to more shared responsibility," and "student as active collaborator and co-producer" to describe the role of students. SaLT has been active since 2006 and as of 2013, has had 250 partnerships through the programme; where new faculty to Bryn Mawr and Haverford are assigned a student consultant for their first semester. The first concept of the SaLT programme that resonated with me was the idea that staff and students gain insights into their learning and teaching by seeing the classroom from other perspectives or "more angles of vision" (Cook-Sather, 2014, p. 36). Further to this, they are not only putting themselves in others' shoes, but actually changing teaching and learning approaches based on these new insights. The quotes from staff at Bryn Mawr and Haverford talked of the value of gaining insight and awareness into the mind of a student, and used descriptors such as "made me more aware," "challenged my choices," and "helped me identify" (Cook-Sather, 2014, p. 38). It was interesting to note that staff were talking more of treating students as partners rather than mere absorbers of knowledge. This demonstrates some of the strengths of staff-student partnerships.

While the programme may have been initially set up for the benefit of staff, it is interesting to note how many of the student consultants reported a change in how they learned. This change in how they learned was a result of experiencing aspects of being a faculty member. For example, students felt "more self-reflexive about [their] own experience and responsibilities," "more conscious of [their] own goals," and "more aware of [their] own learning patterns"

(Cook-Sather, 2014, p. 39). This insight into the life of a teacher seemed to have the benefit of encouraging student consultants to help with improving classroom relations, such as aiding discussions and with generally being more engaged with staff. As with any change to long-standing methods, these new perspectives gained by staff and students also had their downsides. Faculty talked of being overwhelmed at times and found themselves constantly considering all points of view to the detriment of their teaching (Cook-Sather, 2014). Some consultants noted that they found it hard going into situations where their views were not accepted after being at a partnership level with staff, and that insight gained could make them constantly evaluate staff in other situations, to the detriment of their learning. These issues highlight the need to have a support structure for such partnership programmes, both to facilitate and follow-up with participants to confirm lessons learnt.

### **Student scholars programme**

An important development is the Student Scholars Programme at McMaster University, Ontario, Canada (Marquis et al., 2016). The initiative was set up to get students involved in research and educational development activities. Students applied to be one of 13 who were employed as paid members of the institutes' project teams and undertook a variety of projects, such as developing online courses and analysing data from other projects. The idea behind student scholars was to “engage students meaningfully in shaping the future direction of the work” (Marquis et al., 2016, p. 6). Staff were invited to give students meaningful roles and to allow a certain degree of autonomy and involvement in any decisions made. The research into this study produced benefits, but also outlined some challenges in partnership. One of these challenges was dealing with how, in many instances, traditional staff-student roles—with staff as supervisors providing answers, and students as workers with many questions—seemed to develop even though a key aim of the project was equality. Despite some commonly experienced issues, it was reported that many students felt they held meaningful roles, and that the project helped to shift students understanding of teaching and learning, with some quoting: “I now truly appreciate the difficulty of designing a course,” and “it has allowed me to develop new perspectives on how my education is shaped” (Marquis et al., 2016, p. 11). One other interesting point I took from this study was that, although students' understanding of teaching and learning were positively impacted, there was little data to suggest that staff had the same experience (Marquis et al., 2016, p.11). The authors suggest further research into this, and that a support structure for students and staff is needed.

Although the field of staff-student partnership is complex, the literature has given an overview and introduction to this important subject. Staff and student experiences have shown that, although some challenges may arise during the change from the Instruction Paradigm to the Learning Paradigm (Barr & Tagg, 1995), these issues are well worth addressing, as engaging both students and staff is “arguably one of the most important issues facing higher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (Flint, Harrington, & Healey, 2014, p. 7).

### **Ways we incorporate partnership approaches in the NZDF**

Being a learning designer in the NZDF, I find that partnership approaches in my context may look slightly different from the traditional lecturer/student model found in many institutions. Within the New Zealand Defence College (NZDC), learning designers are primarily involved

with the analysis and design of learning. I've identified two major ways in which we partner with both the students we design for and the instructing staff and personnel who benefit from our syllabus design.

A primary way we partner with students is through online-based evaluation processes. This system is used as a foundation, although we also integrate current evaluation theory, practice, and development (Defence Manual of Learning, Chapter B9). There is a specific team within the NZDC who administer four different levels of evaluation. All of our courses receive a level-one evaluation, and the other levels are implemented as needed. A level-one evaluation gathers feedback from both learners and instructors and aims to measure the learner's initial reaction to the course. Elements such as pre-course material, delivery, content, learning environment, and feedback are measured here. Level-two evaluation looks at learners' attainment of the course objectives and measures whether information has been retained and understood by students. A level-three evaluation is sent to managers of students and can be conducted a few months after the course to assess if the student has actually used the course material in the workplace. This measures the transfer of skills to the workplace and checks on the relevance of course content. A level-three activity happens at an agreed length of time after course completion. The level-four evaluation deals with issues largely outside education and asks if the course is meeting the expectations of the NZDF, and if it is adding value and measurable outputs. This evaluation is usually for the benefit of management and does not generally make its way back to the learner.

Although learning designers do not physically conduct surveys of this nature, we work closely with the results and use this information for further course development. As part of our initial design process, we sit down with the Performance and Evaluation team and discuss how we would like a particular course evaluated, and have some input into the types of questions that are asked in a survey. After each course, we are sent the results and use these to gauge both students' experiences and those of their managers. If an issue is found with a course, we can then request a level-three evaluation, and make the appropriate changes to the syllabus—whether that be altering instructional information, or changing assessments in some way. Identifying problems with course delivery and how learning can be better facilitated are also desired outcomes of engaging with feedback. This student and manager feedback is extremely useful when designing a new course, as it is often hard to cover all of the finer details surrounding complex equipment. Constant feedback is also essential to find out if job requirements are changing, but training may not be keeping pace.

Occasionally, if either managers or learners have identified areas for improvement, we will conduct a more face-to-face form of evaluation; this is closer to the idea of students as "pedagogical consultants" (Cook-Sather, 2015). Sometimes students can find it hard to relay information through an impersonal survey, and often students simply do not respond, meaning that further interviews are needed. We can also observe a class in action to get a better understanding of how to help. I have found that students can be a lot more honest when addressing someone in person, rather than online. It is also easier to gain an understanding of actual student experience through discussion, as opposed to supporting artefacts (such as did you *truly* understand the information, as opposed to "the projector was dim," or "my seat was uncomfortable"). As the NZDF has a wide range of courses, from directive instructor-led initial training, through to more learner-led management courses, the types of feedback and the solutions provided are diverse. Investigating models, such as Bovill and Bulley's (2011) ladder of student participation, can help us engage students at all levels, and make sure

learners are getting both the closer direction at the recruit level and more partnership and influence at the senior levels of learning.

A common discussion we have with students is how to better tailor assessments, making them more understandable and creating an experience as close to job performance as possible. As Woolmer et al. (2016, p.18-19) state, “students are rarely disciplinary or pedagogical experts but they are experts in being students. They are ‘closer’ to the experience of learning the material and have an appreciation of what works well and what could be enhanced.” Often students have come up with some novel and pertinent solutions that we as staff would not have even considered. This partnering with students to understand how they learn is becoming more important, as there is often a divide between how staff and students have come through their respective education systems. Those of us accustomed to sitting long written examinations and proving learning through traditional means need some input from a newer generation, who are now being assessed by credit-based and compartmentalised approaches like New Zealand’s NCEA system.

Another area in which student feedback has been critical is in keeping syllabus content current with workplace practice. Many institutions find it hard to keep the training element in step with the professional world, and student partnership has helped in identifying over or under training in particular jobs and trades. When a level-three evaluation is conducted, often we will speak to those ex-students who are in the workplace (in our case, on board RNZN Ships), and gain vital feedback on how successful we were in preparing learners for their work. These discussions have, in some cases, led to major amendments to syllabus content and have helped prevent possible accidents due to under training.

The next approach I’d like to address are the partnerships we undertake with staff. We do this on behalf of students in order to produce the highest quality learning outcomes for them. Part of our job is to work closely with instructors who will be delivering the syllabus and give them different forms of educational advice. Many instructors may only be posted to a school for a short amount of time, and most are subject matter experts in a certain field or on a specific piece of equipment but have not received educational training. This time is spent discussing assessments and trying to move away from the traditional approach or Instruction Paradigm (Barr & Tagg, 1995). Since learning designers are not experts in the courseware, this interaction with staff is vital to our job. Through a shared understanding of each of our roles, the instructors can ensure that the essence of the job is conveyed, and we are able to help them in some aspects of structuring the learning. We also talk about different ways to improve the delivery and facilitation of lessons; often this ties in with any suggestions that students have given through their evaluation surveys.

In addition to collaborating with instructors, we partner with many subject matter experts who either are currently performing a job we are writing a syllabus for or are in charge of policy. These discussions are again taking place on behalf of students, and they give the students the benefit of expertise and experience on particular systems or pieces of equipment. Valuable time is spent with these experts, who review our work and often give advice on certain aspects of course content. These people are often the managers of our students and provide valuable feedback on how well learners are performing in the workplace; this is because they often possess a *bigger picture* view of how individual pieces of learning contribute to a learner’s career. Great ideas have come from these discussions, and their input has been vital to the success of many courses.

The evaluations, interviews, and interactions we have with students play an important part in shaping their learning. The collaboration we have with instructing staff and other Defence professionals is also an effective form of partnership and ensures the courses our sailors, soldiers, and airmen attend reflect current workplace practices.

Although military learning has often been thought of as authoritarian, NZDC policies are inclusive and modern, and recent research indicates we have a lot to gain by involving students in their learning experience. We are actively exploring partnership opportunities with our students into our learning design and instructional practices.

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