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## The Nesting Doll of Student-Staff Partnerships: Meaningful Collaborations through Unique Experiences

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## THE NESTING DOLL OF STUDENT-STAFF PARTNERSHIPS: MEANINGFUL COLLABORATIONS THROUGH UNIQUE EXPERIENCES

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*Ways of engaging students as partners in learning and teaching is arguably one of the most important issues facing Higher Education in the 21st century. This fascinating collection illustrates a wide variety of ways in which student-staff partnerships may be developed, enacted, experienced, and written about. The voices of the participants bring the collection alive.*

*Mick and Ruth Healey*

Welcome to this special issue of *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education (TLTHE)*! It showcases the work of five student-staff teams who presented their work at the ‘Towards Meaningful Partnerships: Student-Staff Collaborations to Enhance Learning and Teaching across the Disciplines’ symposium at the University of Surrey, UK, in September 2019. The aim of the symposium, organised by the Surrey Institute of Education, was to bring together students and staff to explore how they can work together to enhance student experience and develop learning and teaching in different disciplinary contexts. With over 80 participants and nearly 20 sessions, the symposium was a productive and vibrant event. The thought-provoking keynotes from Professors Alison Cook-Sather, Mick Healey, and Ruth Healey encouraged wide-ranging discussions among the symposium participants and stimulated the sharing of ideas and experience. The day culminated in a Liquid Café facilitated by Mick and Ruth Healey, which provided a stimulating and inclusive format to explore some of the questions around student-staff partnerships in more depth.

This issue of *TLTHE* came about as a follow-up to this symposium, giving us the opportunity to bring the excellent work of some of its participants to a wider audience. We, the guest editors of this issue, are also a student-staff team. Sam is a PhD student at the University of Edinburgh investigating the long-term effects of student partnership in her doctoral research. She gave an introductory address at the symposium to frame the event from a student point of view. Nadya is a Teaching Fellow at the Doctoral College at the University of Surrey whose primary role is to support the writing development of postgraduate and early career researchers. She led on the organisation of the symposium whilst being temporarily based at the Surrey Institute of Education. Having been truly impressed by the work presented on the day, we took the opportunity provided by Professor Alison Cook-Sather to guest-edit this issue and had the pleasure of working with five student-staff author teams to put this issue together.

### Articles of the Special Issue

The essays in this issue differ in scope and discipline, but one of the defining features they have in common is their dedication to improving the student learning experience at their respective institutions. The authors showcase the stories of their partnerships through sharing details of their respective projects, delving into all that worked and what they found difficult. What results is a snapshot of what it means to work in the thick of partnership, and sometimes between the lines of the definitions found in literature. All teams took the

opportunity to take a step back to reflect on the process of their partnership, resulting in essays that are focussed both on the outcome as well as the process of partnership. This reflection also led the teams to be able to give recommendations based on their experiences.

**“CO-CREATING A FRAMEWORK FOR STUDENT ENGAGEMENT: STUDENT AND STAFF REFLECTIONS ON A JOURNEY TO PARTNERSHIP,”** by Angelina Shin Yee

Jong, Brianán Johnson, Maria Maguire, Moira Maguire, Aisling Munster, Linda Murphy, Catherine Staunton, Johanna Young, Nicole Byrne, Jack Ryan, Peter Toplis, and Christopher O’Neill, discusses and analyses the process of a student-staff partnership at the Dundalk Institute of Technology in Ireland to co-develop a framework to recognise and encourage student engagement. Whilst reflecting on this initiative, the authors focus on two emergent themes: the tension between structure and ownership, and shifting power.

**“IMPROVING THE HIGHER EDUCATION EXPERIENCE FOR LGBT+ STUDENTS: KEY RECOMMENDATIONS AND REFLECTIONS ON A PARTNERSHIP,”** by Allán Laville, Charlotte

Field, and Lucy Hart, showcases a project exploring the experiences of LGBT+ students at the University of Reading, UK, including the key recommendations of the importance of signposting LGBT+ information and support, wider dissemination of staff training in Trans awareness and developing student-staff partnerships in LGBT+ inclusion. The essay then centres on the individual reflections on this pedagogical partnership provided by each author.

**“REFLECTIONS ON A STUDENT-STAFF PARTNERSHIP: COLLABORATIVE DESIGN OF MODULE ASSESSMENTS,”** by Amanda Millmore, Annika Newnham, Megan Bennett, Teresa

Chew, Jessica Davies, and Thomas Fuller reflects on developing a collaborative relationship and partnership when creating a new final year optional law module at the University of Reading, UK, with a focus on practical skills and employability attributes, and featuring diverse types of assessment. As the project involved students in the module design from the outset, the essay provides practical advice for students and academics interested in partnership work.

**“PLANNING AND PRESENTING TOGETHER: INSIGHTS FROM THE ‘TOWARDS MEANINGFUL PARTNERSHIPS’ SYMPOSIUM,”** by Chris Ribchester, Faye Davies, and Emily Fisher, provides

a reflective account of how a student-staff partnership developed and delivered a joint presentation on the University of Derby’s Undergraduate Research Scholarship Scheme. The essay draws out a number of factors that can help to achieve a beneficial, meaningful and egalitarian partnership between staff and students, notably the importance of developing trust among partners, being sensitive to potential power issues, and recognising and valuing everybody’s voice and contribution.

**“STUDENT CURATOR PROJECT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SURREY: ENCOURAGING AND EMBRACING INCLUSIVITY AND DIVERSITY THROUGH A STAFF-STUDENT PARTNERSHIP,”**

by Catherine Stephen, Catherine Batson, Sarah Surget, and Joel Weller discusses the multiple benefits – personal, professional, and organisational – of the Student Curator Project at the University of Surrey, UK, as well as the impact of the project on the University. Along with reflecting on the co-delivery model and its effect on student engagement, the authors also explore the challenges of working in partnership, such as balancing workload and ethical tensions around delivering such projects.

## **The Importance of Unique Structure**

One of the major differences between the essays is in their structure, which became apparent early on when we were reviewing the submissions. This led to a number of discussions between us about the nature of writing and the field at large. Essentially, each author team chose a very distinct and unique structure to present their partnership and ideas; so much so that when reading the essays one after another, the difference was very noticeable. Thinking that this could be alienating for our readers, our first instinct was to encourage our authors to provide a ‘heads up’ to the readers in their introductions on how to navigate these structures. This initial instinct was, we hope, understandable. We’ve all been formally trained to expect a certain structure of a journal paper and when it is not upheld, we need to prepare our reader for what is coming. It dawned on us then that we would be essentially asking our authors to make their papers *come out* and identify themselves as some form of ‘different.’

We recognised this tendency to explain away things that we consider to be out of the norm within our field too, because that is also how many of our colleagues react when we mention partnership. It has made us wonder what would happen if we stopped explaining ourselves like this, especially since that in the end only drives the message that we see partnership as something that is not the ‘norm,’ when we wholeheartedly believe that it should be. If we want partnership to be widely accepted and established, perhaps we need to treat it as such without the tendency to over-explain.

As such, whilst we ensured that the thematic similarities of talking about the practicalities of partnership were sustained across essays, we endeavoured to keep the unique flavour and structure brought forth by their authors as a reminder that each partnership is similarly unique and can ‘speak for itself’ in a particular way. What results is a collection of essays centred around partnership, with structures as unique and diverse as partnership itself. We hope that the essays in this issue do justice to the voices and personalities of the people involved in these partnership projects, as well as the individuality of the projects themselves. The work presented here has already been disseminated nationally and, in some cases, internationally, and has had impact both institutionally and across the wider Higher Education sector.

## **The Russian Nesting Doll of Partnership**

This entire project could be likened to a Russian nesting doll with partnership at every level: the essays showcased in this issue are written in partnership by author teams reflecting on partnership projects that they presented in partnership at the Surrey Symposium. These essays were then edited by us, again in partnership, and we would now like to add yet another layer to this by taking a moment to reflect on how we worked together in our own partnership.

What has struck us in the process of our collaboration was how similarly we felt about the essays throughout the whole editorial process, and how we could bounce ideas off each other and build on each other’s points and observations to move things forward. Whilst there were certainly tasks that each of us saw as higher priority, the fact that we had spent time at the beginning defining our main goals for the contributions, in line with the journal’s ethos and approach, meant that our sense of the essays ended up being pretty much the same. In other words, we have managed to stay on the message that we took time to define together at the beginning. Perhaps this process of defining the vision for and the key objectives of a project, which is also echoed in most of the essays in this issue, as well as in the wider literature on

the topic, is key to having a *meaningful* student-staff partnership—a partnership where participants are ‘on the same page,’ learn from each other, and work together to achieve a common goal.

Indeed, the level of agreement we experienced when working through the comments for the articles was incredibly high—sometimes to the point of it being a bit disconcerting. Often, we would find ourselves making the exact same comments and were unusually united in our perceptions of the articles. Beyond defining our goals ahead of time, this may be due to the fact that each article was written in partnership. As both students and staff were involved in writing each essay, both of us felt spoken to and engaged with. The co-authorship ensured that each author team’s writing was accessible to both a student and staff editor.

In a way, this whole endeavour provides a powerful case for the feasibility and benefits of using partnership at *every* level of learning and teaching work.

### **Our Final Thoughts**

We very much hope that not only will this issue provide a stimulating read of different stories of pedagogical partnerships—partnerships, whose participants have themselves found them both meaningful and fulfilling—but also that it will serve as a reminder that partnership work can happen at any level, as long as there is a common understanding of the goals, and as long as there exists a will, enthusiasm, and openness to work together, listen to, and understand each other. It is our hope that the unique, disparate structures of the articles presented illustrate the uniqueness of each partnership, and that this issue speaks for itself why working in partnership should be the default way of approaching learning and teaching in Higher Education.