Reflections on a Student-Staff Partnership: Collaborative Design of Module Assessments

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REFLECTIONS ON A STUDENT-STAFF PARTNERSHIP: COLLABORATIVE DESIGN OF MODULE ASSESSMENTS

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The Collaboration Context

Law teaching can often be rather traditional in nature, with a heavy reliance upon end-of-year examinations, which leads to bunching of assessments and higher pressure on students. The academic partners in this collaboration from the School of Law at the University of Reading, Amanda Millmore and Dr. Annika Newnham, were keen to create a new final year optional law module focusing upon state intervention in family lives (the module evolved to become 'Children, Families and the State'). They wanted to create an innovative module with a focus on practical skills, whilst also aiming to embed employability attributes within the module design and address the issue of assessment by diversifying the types of assessment and the timing of when those assessments would be due.

Given the blank slate for the creation of the module, it was an ideal opportunity to involve students in the module design from the outset. This partnership was supported financially by the University of Reading—a competitive application process had led us to being awarded one of the University's Partnerships in Learning and Teaching (PLanT) awards.

Finding the Student Partners

The academic partners were keen to offer the opportunity of partnership to as wide and diverse a group of students as possible. As the module was destined to be taught in the final year of the degree, the entire cohort of second year students was approached to consider getting involved, the rationale being that students would be most keen to volunteer if they had the prospect of taking the module themselves the following year.

Over 10% of the year group responded to this initial request. The opportunities presented were to be part of the core partnership group of students, or to be involved in focus groups; each option had different time implications for the students. We formed our selective partnership when the academic partners sifted the list of volunteers down to the five core student partners via a questionnaire that asked about their motivation for getting involved. Our student partners were Megan Bennett, Teresa Chew, Jessica Davies, Thomas Fuller and Krissy Hiu; a group that included an international student and a mature student. In addition, two of the students had personal experiences of the Family Justice System. Four of the students have contributed to this essay.

Reflections on our Partnership

The remainder of this essay comprises our written reflections as members of the partnership, whilst telling the story of how the collaboration unfolded, offering our thoughts on the nature of pedagogical partnership and its impact upon us individually, as well as noting the impact that this partnership and module has had more widely. Megan, Teresa, Tom, and Jess provide their views as student partners, whilst Amanda and Annika reflect on their experiences of partnership as academics.

Initial Doubts and Concerns about a Pedagogical Partnership

Amanda: Going into the partnership, I had many concerns. I was concerned that students might not be interested in designing assessments, or that they would find the time investment too great and the partnership might falter. I also worried that I would end up only hearing the voices of a small group of highly engaged students who would typically volunteer for this kind of project, whereas the group of students in the partnership brought a range of views and experiences; none of us knew each other before this partnership, so it created a unique group dynamic. My largest concern as a novice working in partnership was about relinquishing control of module design. The key to success here was to set clear boundaries for the students, and then step back and hand over that defined area to them, allowing the academics to focus on the other aspects of the module.

Annika: Initially, I felt anxious about allowing a group of unknown students to shape this project. I had been thinking of this module for several years and had developed a vision, which I did not want to dilute.

Megan: The concern that I had was that some partnerships might end up being a little half-hearted because students might already feel too busy and stressed, so despite initial excitement, their involvement might dwindle with the additional pressure added to their plates, leaving more work for professors.

Jess: I worried that some people would not go into this with the correct attitude and there might end up being some resentment between the teacher and the students. I also worried that it could overwhelm students—all years of university are challenging for different reasons, and undertaking something like this does have the possibility to be quite time consuming.

Tom: One of the doubts I had was the actual impact that my views would have on the final product. However, what we said during meetings was recorded and implemented when we moved on to the focus groups. Consequently, it felt that the input of the students was instrumental and that our voice had a huge impact on the final product.

Developing the Collaborative Relationship

As participants in a new partnership, none of us had worked together before, and it was vitally important to avoid a power imbalance and to ensure that there was equality among partners, avoiding any kind of hierarchy in the student/academic dynamic.

Annika: I was initially worried whether I would be able to adapt what is often a hierarchical relationship with the students into a genuine partnership. The best assessors here are the students, but it did feel successful. It was helpful that we all had a clear understanding about

2

what was, and was not, involved in this project. That allowed me to 'let go' of some areas and trust the students.

Amanda: Although, at the outset, Annika and I had to lead the conversations, we were keen to encourage the students to own the project. Our initial ice-breaking meeting (over tea and biscuits) was aimed at setting clear expectations that the students' views were of crucial value and that this was to be a partnership of co-creation rather than consultation. I was concerned that quieter voices might not shine through, but we did our best to foster a positive atmosphere where everyone's views mattered, and even quieter students like Teresa participated in a meaningful way. To this end, the student partners took full control of the assessments within the module, leaving the delivery of teaching to the academic partners. Together, we built the module from that starting point.

Megan: What excites me about these partnerships is that they provide a rare opportunity to share student ideas relating to our education with those who teach us, and to make a difference in the structure of the university as a whole and in specific modules within the courses offered. In a course-specific partnership, a pedagogical partnership is exciting because these projects will hopefully influence how other module convenors choose to examine areas of the course in a way that will aid students in becoming more well-rounded.

Teresa: The two module convenors really trusted students and genuinely wanted to reflect students' opinions and desires. I think there was a genuine intention to create a module for the best of students, and the mutual trust laid the foundations for a pedagogical partnership.

Student-run Focus Groups

The consensus from our initial discussions was that rather than struggling to get the wider student cohort to complete questionnaires about their thoughts on assessment, we would do better to sample student views qualitatively using focus groups. We also decided that the students should be in charge of and run the focus groups, as we felt that this would encourage student discussion, so Amanda ran training for the student partners to support them in facilitating those focus-group discussions.

The aim of the focus groups was to bring forward a wider range of student views on assessments, concentrating on the key questions of assessment type, weighting, and timing, before mapping proposed assessments to the employability attributes. Together the student partners ran two focus groups with a range of volunteer second-year students, and the sessions were recorded so that everyone involved could concentrate upon a full discussion.

Megan: Our concern was that the views of a small group of student volunteers might not be truly reflective of what the student body wants – but this can be balanced out by having a group putting forward ideas and opinions and then using multiple focus groups to ensure that these ideas are functional and desirable.

Jess: The students involved in the partnership took a hands-on role with the development. We ran the focus groups, which were asking other students what assessment methods they would prefer and why.

Tom: One of the most exciting parts of this partnership was working with a larger group of students as focus groups to gain insight into what they wanted. This helped us understand what a larger body of students would prefer and through discussions with them we were able

to understand their reasoning behind it. Consequently, we were able to design a module that, to the best of its ability, was meeting all the criteria set out by the student cohort.

Teresa: Students believed that their opinions mattered and had a fruitful discussion. We worked together to create the framework of the module and we took opinions into careful consideration. From the meetings and focus groups, we gathered a lot of opinions and it was interesting to listen to diverse views and to learn that most of the students would prefer real-life like assessments as they will be helpful in the future, even though they are less familiar than an assessed essay.

Annika: I really enjoyed stepping back from the focus groups, taking notes in the corner. The students ran them so well, and the result was a great range of views. I enjoyed witnessing the creativity, but I was also surprised by the students' concern to maintain academic rigour (alongside diversity and fairness) when discussing alternative assessments.

Assessment Co-Design

Following the student focus groups, the partnership met again to design the assessments for the module. The students led on creating the mode of assessment for this module, providing an assessment diet that reflected the earlier discussions and focus group views: to create a novel range of assessments with more diverse types and options, weight, and timings than appeared in other final-year modules. Our solution made it the only final-year law module at the time with summative assessments scheduled in the Autumn term.

Jess: We took the answers from the focus groups and drafted (with many minor alterations, deliberations, and a lot of discussion) what we believed to be a module that focused on embedding employability skills and also on providing students with enough creative control over how they were assessed.

Tom: What was exciting about a pedagogical partnership was the opportunity to engage in the development of a new module that I could pick the following year to study. Engaging in this way meant that the module could be tailored to our needs instead of what the lecturers believe we want. Therefore, as students we had a platform to speak on and actually have our voice heard and listened to.

Megan: As somebody whose strong point does not lie in end-of-year exams, I found it compelling to know that I could contribute to other methods through which students can be assessed and also work together to develop transferable skills (e.g., through presentations and research tasks), which would aid students when it comes to employability and help to deepen understanding of the content at the same time.
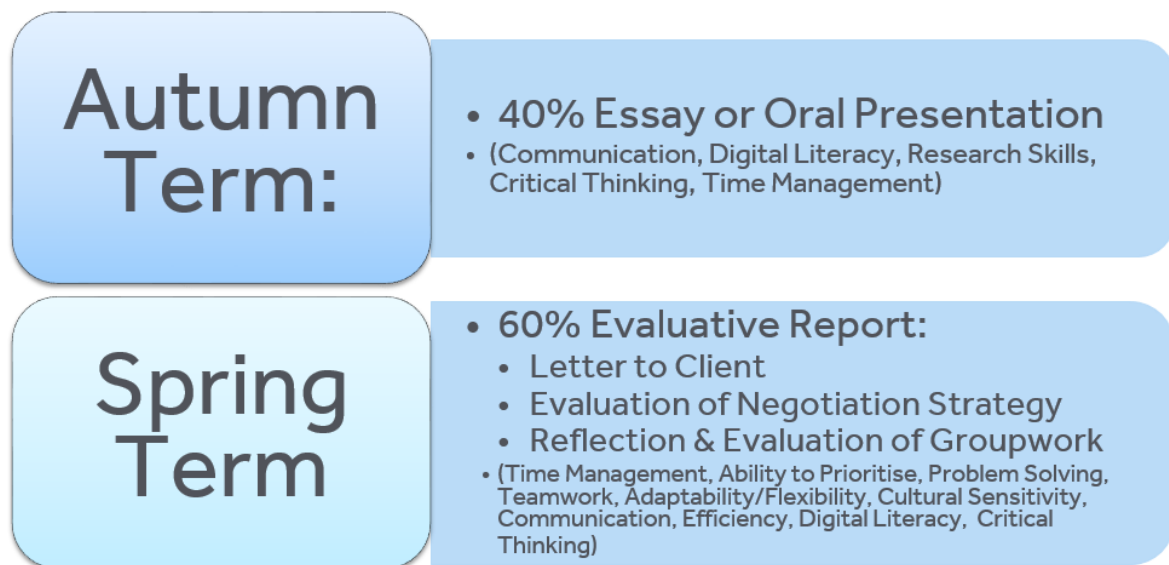
Teresa: The fact that I was playing a role in creating a module that I would soon take excited me. We had different ideas and opinions on the assessment methods every time we met, and we had no idea how the module would turn out until the very last meeting, but students' opinions were all reflected.

Amanda: From an academic's perspective it was exciting and terrifying in equal measure to hand over responsibility for an entire aspect of teaching to students. It is exciting to see things from multiple perspectives, and the module assessments ended up being rather different from

4

how Annika and I would have designed them ourselves. I have really enjoyed working with the students, and they have made it such a pleasurable experience with their boundless enthusiasm and good humour. The impact for students of being able to select a module that you have helped to design cannot be underestimated.

Annika: It is exciting to give students the opportunity to work in partnership, to allow them to be invested in a module at a more than superficial, consultative level. It made Amanda and me work that much harder to ensure that the module was a success.

The final assessments created for the module were as follows (highlighting employability attributes):

Autumn Term:
- 40% Essay or Oral Presentation
- (Communication, Digital Literacy, Research Skills, Critical Thinking, Time Management)

Spring Term
- 60% Evaluative Report:
  - Letter to Client
  - Evaluation of Negotiation Strategy
  - Reflection & Evaluation of Groupwork
- (Time Management, Ability to Prioritise, Problem Solving, Teamwork, Adaptability/Flexibility, Cultural Sensitivity, Communication, Efficiency, Digital Literacy, Critical Thinking)

The Final Module – Children, Families and the State

Having designed the module assessment, the partnership then wound down, as the students' availability was limited by their other assessments and commitments at that time of the academic year. Amanda and Annika then took the assessments and designed the module around them, aligning the learning objectives and delivery of the module with the student discussions about what they wanted from a module.

The module 'Children, Families and the State' was subsequently approved for teaching for the first time in the 2019/20 academic year; numbers were capped to ensure that teaching was manageable, but the module was oversubscribed despite its arguably niche subject area. The module was taught as a mixture of traditional law with a practical case exercise, in which the students worked in groups to represent the different parties in a fictional legal case, supported by realistic documents, negotiation exercises and Court hearings.

We emphasised the collaborative partnership design process in the module guide and also in the introductory lectures, explaining the unique assessments and how they were aligned with employability attributes.

The module has been hugely successful, with exceptionally high levels of satisfaction in student evaluations. Many students praised the assessments in their evaluation comments. For

5

example, one student wrote, *"...the ways in which the module is taught and assessed make it the most interesting module available on the course…".* Another student praised the element of choice in the first assessment (the same titles were offered in the form of essays or presentations – an innovation that stemmed from an idea put forward in one of the focus groups). Other students emphasised that the timing of assessment was beneficial: "…it was good having an essay before Christmas as coursework deadlines are heavier this side [Spring]…."

In the 2020/21 academic year the cap has been removed to offer the module to an increased number of students. The innovative assessments and module design and the collaborative design team have been significant selling points to prospective students when considering their module choices.

Jess: The module has been a good experience. I enjoyed taking it—it was beneficial to me in terms of personal and educational growth. It is challenging but I believe the benefits outweighed any negatives. The module was almost exactly what I think we wanted it to be. It was not black and white; it was not a case of providing students with information and expecting them to blindly retain it and be able to regurgitate it at a later date. What made this module so much more than that was that you not only had to apply the law, but you also had to convince other people that this was the best approach—which would be a real-life scenario. It provided students with real-life experience. It was quite strange taking a module that I helped to design, but it was also very rewarding. The other modules I took in my final year were all coursework based and most had assessments of the typical essay/presentation format, so taking a module as innovative as this made it far more engaging, which is exactly how I envisioned it turning out. I pushed during the design process to try to ensure that people who were taking the module would not be bored during lectures and seminars, and would actually be excited to participate; I think this was achieved for the most part. My own personal experience was that I was excited to participate and attend lectures but also always nervous about how other people would experience it.

Teresa: I really enjoyed the module seminars; they were really fun and mindful of the employability skills. We finished lectures before Christmas, and after that we attended seminars, where we focused on the case file and negotiation. The client file was simulating real life, and our decisions would affect the outcome. We took turns negotiating with the other parties and building up the case file. From that we learnt about critical thinking, task prioritising, problem-solving, and teamwork. As most of us were not familiar with negotiation and writing a client file, the lecturers spent time to explain and proofread our drafts. For the other modules this year, in both lectures and tutorials, a lot of students demonstrate passive listening. In this module, we not only actively listen but we put what we have learnt into practice and enhance our skills. Therefore, it is definitely a more engaging module as a result of the pedagogical partnership and the lecturers' enthusiasm.

Tom: The final module was a joy to study and I really felt that it reflected the students' input, as it moved away from the typical module structure. Students were able to gather their knowledge in the first term, knowing that this was the foundation for the application of the law in the second term. Therefore, we drew upon new skills in the client file exercise, which put us in the role of a solicitor and challenged us to act and think like one. Subsequently, we learnt through our mistakes and from the ideas of our peers; thus students had the freedom to apply the law creatively and negotiate agreements on their own accord. Furthermore, the structure of the module differentiated it from others because there were no exams, making it more enjoyable to study as it was paced throughout the year. Overall, helping design this

6

module and the way it was structured made it one of the most enjoyable modules I studied this year.

Megan: Having spent a year abroad since working in this partnership, I am looking forward to returning to Reading to do this module, as I have heard really positive things from students taking it this year and had many friends recommend the course to me. This leads me to believe that the module has been very successful, and so I can't wait to see the result of our project.

Implications for us as Individuals

Jess: The development of the module gave me a really important insight into how university modules actually work. I undertook this partnership in my second year of university with no previous insight on pedagogy and pedagogical relationships or with any familiarity with how university modules were assessed, designed, or graded. The partnership not only allowed me to gain an understanding of how things work from the lecturers I was in partnership with, but it also allowed me to see how other students view assessment methods. It gave me a multidimensional understanding in a way that I did not expect—I understood why things have to be done a certain way, but I also understood why there was a certain type of animosity towards the rigidity of the educational system. The most personal effect it had on me is that I now realise that there is a reason behind every single aspect of a module. The structure of teaching, the assessment methods, and the content all link together in an attempt to provide students with the most immersive and attainable knowledge possible.

Tom: As a student, this project helped me gain insight into how assessments are designed, which is applicable to all my other modules. Furthermore, it helped me build a strong relationship with the staff members, because as a student, you do not spend a lot of time with lecturers, but I was able to work closely with new students and staff as a team. I have also developed skills such as project management and communication because not only was I talking to lecturers, but I was also guiding focus groups by asking students questions and keeping the conversation moving in a productive direction.

Megan: This experience has given me an insight as to how module content and activities are meant to advance us further after our degrees. It has had a really great personal impact, particularly in terms of employability. It has given me so much more to talk about in my applications and on my CV as it demonstrates so many good attributes and skills.

Teresa: I was concerned that I was not being helpful to the team nor contributing despite being present. I am such an introvert and a listener that I could not interject and I did not speak unless asked. The other partners were nice and encouraging, asking for my opinions. The main reason of me holding back was that I was not familiar with the assessment methods; therefore, I could not come up with a brilliant idea, and I was afraid to make mistakes and embarrass myself. My previous education institutions were pretty basic; a lot of teachers read from textbooks or slides and very few of them made attempts to make the learning process more engaging and useful, and most of them aimed to get students to pass the exams instead of passing on knowledge. I would have spoken up if I had done enough research and preparation beforehand. As a result, I have learnt the importance of researching and preparing, as well as the fact that all voices matter. In the legal industry, one has to

network and communicate with clients and colleagues frequently. From this experience, I have discovered my shortcoming of holding back, and I am making progress to resolve this concern. I am definitely becoming more confident in speaking up. I am still hesitant to interrupt, but in the group work of this module I gave opinions about the law we should rely on and suggestions on negotiation strategies. I feel more comfortable having a conversation with strangers and acquaintances now.

Annika: Initially hesitant, I have to say I loved this experience. It was an enjoyable process, and I also think that the end result was much better than it would have been without student involvement.

Amanda: I must confess that I loved the experience of partnering with students, who gave so much more to our collaboration than I anticipated. My involvement in this partnership has enabled me to join a University-wide partnership community of practice, which has linked me to like-minded colleagues and encouraged me to participate in other student-staff partnerships. It has raised the profile of the School of Law within the University, highlighting that we work in innovative ways with our students, and the students themselves have been feted for their presentation skills when they have presented the project at University events and across the sector at conferences. Finally, the development of this module has shown how we can teach law in a dynamic, practical way, and it has genuinely been such a joy to teach, to inspire enthusiasm for the real-life application of studying law and to assess the students in ways that are meaningful to them.

Wider Implications of this Partnership

There are a number of wider implications of this partnership as a model process for module design both within the School of Law and across the sector.

Our partnership model has been held up as an example of good practice at the University of Reading. Within the School of Law, this model of partnership has been adopted by another academic designing a new module, who had significant student interest in volunteering, as the wider student community had seen the positive impact of their involvement in our project. We have recently won an award from our Students' Union (nominated by students) for the most Outstanding Student-Staff Partnership, which demonstrates recognition from the students of the importance of collaborative partnerships and their positive impact within the University.

Megan: Getting involved in the module has also strengthened how involved I feel within the Law School—it is good to think that as a student I can make an impact to benefit other students. Our work has already had an impact on campus, particularly within the Law School. Another project has already been initiated by another lecturer in the hope of developing a new module through a similar process. I hope that it will also inspire other projects across campus to make use of pedagogical relationships to develop courses and engage students in making a difference within the University to benefit future students.

Teresa: After our module was created, I received an email from another lecturer stating that he is creating a new module with students. Our success might encourage more module convenors to use this approach. Pedagogical partnership will make the module more engaging for students to learn, less conventional, and more adaptive to the employability skills. Therefore, I hope that this approach will be widely used.

8

Annika: As our Director of the Undergraduate Programmes in the School of Law, I am now keen to use collaboration with students in future module development or amendments, and for such projects to look at module delivery as well as assessment.

Amanda: The impression that I get from talking to our wider cohort of students is that this project helped improve and build upon the sense of community within the School of Law. It proved that academics are willing to listen and seek out student views on things that matter to them, and this highlighted that there is a genuine feeling of collaboration and partnership between academics and students. Breaking down barriers can only be a positive step in improving relationships and the environment for all. The fact that my colleague had such a high level of interest in helping to design his new module is indicative of this new way of thinking.

All of the student partners have subsequently disseminated and presented this work internally within the University of Reading at teaching and learning events and conferences. Moreover, some of the student partners have been active in disseminating their work more widely at national conferences. Megan and Tom applied for and were awarded a bursary by SEDA (Staff & Educational Development Association) to present the project at their conference as well as sit on a student panel to answer questions. Jess and Amanda co-presented the partnership project at the high profile Advance HE Teaching and Learning Conference, and Krissy and Amanda co-presented at the University of Surrey's partnership symposium.

Megan: Tom and I went on to do a presentation at the SEDA Conference in Belfast (May 2019) to demonstrate how our pedagogical partnership was carried out within the Law School and hopefully gave ideas as to how others could begin to lay the foundations for these partnerships in their respective institutions. It has boosted my confidence—presenting at the conference after the completion of the process was something that I never thought that I would have the courage to do.

Our Advice for Others Interested in Partnership Work

We thought that it might help others considering partnership work to have some clear advice, which we have distilled into our top tips for students and academics.

Advice for Students:

- Do not be afraid to voice your opinion—your views matter.
- Take advantage of opportunities to get involved; you are influential in effecting change and it is good for self-development.
- Focus groups are a great way to test ideas and find out what other students want.
- Immerse yourself in it; even though this is not easy, you have to be prepared to commit the time to make it work.

Advice for Academics:

- Get students involved at the outset, not as an afterthought.
- Set the boundaries or a framework for the students to work from, then relinquish control.
- Respect your student partners and ensure that they are well-supported.
- Avoid preconceptions about what students might want; trust your student partners to know what their fellow students care about.

Conclusion

As partners we have all developed new skills and learned so much from the experience, and we can only recommend this collaborative approach to others. We have felt significant impact within the School of Law, with increased feelings of community. Our student-staff partnership has been described as trailblazing and it has become a model for collaborations in curriculum design within the School of Law at the University of Reading, as well as influencing others at institutional level and sector-wide. Most importantly, the outcome of our partnership is not merely the creation of a successful and innovative new module, but a realisation that there are better ways to design modules; the positive experience of the collaborative process is as valuable a result as the module itself.

10