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Chris Ribchester
University of Derby

Faye Davies
University of Derby

Emily Fisher
University of Derby

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PLANNING AND PRESENTING TOGETHER: INSIGHTS FROM THE 'TOWARDS MEANINGFUL PARTNERSHIPS' SYMPOSIUM

Chris Ribchester, PhD, Associate Professor: Learning and Teaching, University of Derby, UK

Faye Davies, VP (Activities), Union of Students and BSc Geology Graduate, University of Derby, UK

Emily Fisher, Third Year Undergraduate, BSc Forensic Science, University of Derby, UK

I. Introduction: "There's this opportunity coming up and we'll be able to deliver a paper..."

This essay offers a reflective account of how a student-staff partnership developed and delivered a joint presentation at the 'Towards Meaningful Partnerships' Symposium at the University of Surrey in September 2019. Faye, Chris, and Emily presented together about the University of Derby's Undergraduate Research Scholarship Scheme (URSS), which provides significant opportunities for students and staff to work collaboratively on research projects of mutual interest. Since 2014, 225 projects have been awarded funding by the University in the form of a bursary to enable students to participate as researchers for up to six weeks, typically during the summer months between the second and third years of undergraduate study. Each year, the Scheme culminates in a research conference, which includes the display of posters linked to each project as well as the opportunity, for those students who wish, to present their research findings to the delegates. Ongoing evaluation of the URSS has highlighted significant positive impacts for students, including the development of a wide range of academic, personal, and professional skills with beneficial implications for future study aspirations and/or employability prospects. Benefits for staff are also apparent, including the enhancement of research capacity and increased profile through the dissemination of project outcomes, often in partnership with their student researchers.

The presentation at the Symposium provided a concise overview of the Scheme's operation and impacts to set a context, but the key content focused on Emily and Faye's personal stories of being involved in two (very different) research projects, including exploration of the benefits and challenges of working in partnership with members of staff. Emily and Faye are affiliated to the College of Life and Natural Sciences at the University of Derby, a College that has proven to be particularly successful at securing URSS funding (approximately one third of all projects completed).

Faye completed her URSS project in 2018 and graduated with a BSc Geology degree in 2019. During her final year of studies, she was elected the Union of Students' Vice President (Activities) for the 2019-2020 academic year. Faye's research project was a large scale, desk-based spatial analysis of West African lagoon systems using open Geographical Information Systems software. A key goal was to identify the extent to which these key ecosystems are threatened by changes associated with urbanisation and climate change. Faye produced a poster for the URSS conference in October 2018 and also presented her key research findings to those in attendance.

Emily completed her URSS project in 2019 and was just about to start the third year of her BSc Forensic Science degree at the time of the Surrey Symposium. Emily's research, completed in partnership with two other students and with significant field-based data collection, focused on measuring the rates and impacts of insect access on cadaver decomposition, a topic of significant

practical application to police investigations. At the time of presenting at the Symposium, Emily had still to attend the URSS conference for her cohort of projects, planned for October 2019.

Chris is an Associate Professor of Learning and Teaching at the University of Derby, working in the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT). CELT coordinates the URSS and Chris, along with other colleagues, plays a key role in delivering the Scheme from reviewing project applications right through to charring sessions at the concluding conference. Chris was a lecturer in Geography for just over twenty years before moving into an Academic Practice Advisor role at the University of Birmingham, UK, in 2015, prior to joining the University of Derby in 2018.

The paragraphs above set a descriptive context for the discussion that follows. The purpose of this essay is not to rehearse the same information that was presented at the Symposium. Instead, the goal is to provide a reflective account of the tripartite partnership that formed, over a relatively short time frame, to design and then deliver the presentation, and also to compare and contrast this with the working relationships that formed earlier within the URSS research teams. As perhaps hinted at already, a hierarchical relationship might have easily emerged within this collaboration for the Symposium: an experienced member of staff with cross-university responsibilities for the Scheme; a graduate who had completed her research project 12 months previously and now employed by Derby's Union of Students in a high profile role; and an undergraduate student still in the process of finalising her URSS project. **However, the authors agree that this did not happen.** In this essay we will provide individual and collective reflections about how we achieved a more egalitarian relationship and, importantly, what factors seemed to affect this. Whilst these reflections refer to specific contexts and set of experiences, we argue that these factors have wider applicability in relation to the formation and enactment of student-staff partnerships for learning and teaching.

To encourage the sharing of useful reflections on the process of 'planning and presenting together,' another team member from CELT, Dr. Tamsin Bowers-Brown, facilitated an informal discussion among Emily, Faye, and Chris in early March 2020. The narrative below summarises the key themes that emerged from that discussion and quotes frequently from it.

II. "You don't expect to teach your lecturer and you kind of expect them to have the answers"

Faye and Emily's recollections of their URSS project experiences highlight powerfully how research and a shared interest in the pursuit of new knowledge can squeeze the commonly perceived divide between tutor and student, particularly evident in more didactic teaching contexts. Faye noted that:

Throughout the entire [research] team it was never like that 'lecturer – teacher' ... when we met about the research we were all on the same level, we're all researchers trying to move this piece of work forward and looking at how can we get this published and how can it progress.

Similarly, Emily commented:

We had meetings and obviously it was with six of us, because there were three students and three lecturers, and any point I didn't feel uncomfortable because I felt that there was three lecturers there telling me what to do. It was more I was part of a team and I could put in the ideas and they'd take them away if they felt like they needed them. Anybody could put in the ideas and there was no judgement on those ideas which I thought was really useful.

Both highlighted the unusual experience of sharing new findings and (sometimes-unexpected) data outcomes with members of staff, in the process at least equalising or sometimes reversing the traditional relationship between tutor and student. The experience of her URSS project led Emily to conclude that:

Everybody's still learning and picking things up, and there's research out there that hasn't been done yet and we're exploring it. I think that's where actually the playing fields gets lowered and we're more level because we're doing the research ... we're the ones seeing the patterns and we're seeing the new bits that are coming out.

Although both acknowledged that lecturers vary a lot in their teaching approaches and openness to student perspectives, during their URSS projects Emily and Faye perceived themselves more as valued partners in a common endeavour. This sense of inclusivity continued into the process of preparing and then delivering the presentation at the Symposium, as will now be discussed.

III. "The staff have the power ... they need to let go of the power"

Initially Chris proposed adopting a reasonably novel approach to the presentation, which would have involved him interviewing the students about their URSS experiences, including some degree of ad libbing. Both Faye and Emily had reservations about this approach and the challenge of delivering it in a coherent and interesting way for the audience. Consequently, they decided on a more traditional approach to the presentation, including structured PowerPoint slides, albeit with frequent switching between Emily and Faye so that, at least to some extent, they could feed off each other's input.

These initial interactions and negotiations were critical for setting the tone of this partnership between three people who were relatively unfamiliar with each other at this early stage. Chris observed:

My original idea was to go for a kind of full-blown interview. I'm less sure you were overly enthused about that idea, which is a really important point because I could tell that you weren't, and I wasn't completely sure, and I thought well if I really push on that then immediately I'm sort of disempowering you, and your perspective is equally valid.

He continued:

OK I went in with this slightly unusual idea but I was open-minded as to whether we should go with that or not, but within a short period of time I picked up on more of a structure, more of a traditional presentation. But I think the really important thing to hold in mind is that I was just creating the skeleton of it really, I really was not filling in the blanks at all so I felt like I was framing it but not directing it or controlling it.

This 'skeleton' gave Emily and Faye the space to share their personal reflections on the details of their projects, their personal development over the course of their involvement in the URSS, and the challenges they encountered. In the process, they served to 'bring to life' and 'personalise' the experience of students and staff working together as co-researchers.

Ultimately, a key theme that emerged in the conversation with Tamsin was how staff need to be comfortable ‘loosening’ their power, influence, and control in order to facilitate any genuine and authentic partnership with their students.

IV. “It was bit like organising a mini-field course”

The reflective conversation identified a clear underlying narrative describing growing trust in the working relationship between Faye, Emily, and Chris over time, a trust that was perhaps most obviously manifest in a growing comfort in being honest and sharing opinions with each other. Emily noted:

As we’ve gone on and obviously we’ve got to know each other and we’ve realised what each other is comfortable with, I think actually being more honest has come along with it as well and the trust of understanding each other.

Chris shared his main concern about what might hinder their participation in the Symposium:

I wasn’t nervous about doing the presentation or going, and I wasn’t nervous about either of you doing a good job because I knew that you would ... the only thing that I was anxious about was whether we had enough time to build up that trustful relationship so that we’d feel comfortable finishing off the presentation, obviously being at the event itself and presenting. That trustful relationship really is at the heart of all teaching and all learning experiences in my view.

All agreed that the meal together at the hotel in the evening before the Symposium represented an important moment when the working relationship solidified and became more ‘natural’ as they got to know each other a little better and, at the same time, firmed up the final details of the presentation.

Chris was able to draw some parallels with his prior experiences as a lecturer:

I felt like we went on a journey, literally and metaphorically, over a 24 hour period, which is very similar to going a residential field course ... there is a quite lot of trepidation and uncertainty for all parties in a way at the outset and then, through formative moments, the bonding sort of happens and then it usually comes to a peak around maybe an assessment exercise, in this case the presentation, and then afterwards there was that sense of satisfaction I think and a sort of comfort with each other.

A significant degree of trust and honesty seems integral to effective and sustained staff-student partnerships. This may take time to build up when interactions between students and staff are intermittent, but the experience of planning and delivering this presentation also suggests that it can be constructed over a shorter timeframe, aided by having a common goal.

V. “The devil is in the details”

Another theme that emerged from the conversation was the extent to which small things, sometimes deliberate, occasionally fortuitous, can make a lot of difference in shaping a more egalitarian working

relationship. We note three examples here.

First, Faye and Emily both noted that they felt like the “centre of attention” during the presentation. According to Faye, “when we were presenting, the focus was very much on us two, our projects, what we gained as students from it.”

It was always Chris’s aspiration to give the students the ‘space’ to express their voice. In part this was achieved by him speaking only for a relatively short amount of time at both the beginning and end, just framing and then concluding the presentation. It was also achieved by deliberately standing at the extreme edge of the room (“I was nearly out of the door”) when Emily and Faye were speaking. He adopted a similar tactic during the questions at the end, again to direct attention towards the student perspective.

Secondly, the facilitated discussion opened up a conversation about the potential division, not really acknowledged at the time, between Faye and Emily—the former having completed her research project a year earlier, now graduated and now employed by the Union of Students. Chris noted that his suggestion about the ordering of the discussion of the URSS projects was an attempt to mitigate this possible hierarchy:

Emily should go first ... The worst case scenario in my mind would be that I would be upfront, the ‘wise’ person ... then it would be Faye whose done the project and she spends 10 minutes articulating her experiences and then Emily comes in at the end maybe running out of time, and basically you’re set up to go ‘well, it’s pretty much everything that they said,’ plus one or two extra details.

Thirdly, the potential split between the presenters and the audience was closed, albeit somewhat inadvertently. Faye recollects: “When we got the timetable for the conference through we were right before lunch. So I said we need ‘sweets’—NOBODY will listen if you are right before lunch, people are thinking about that lunch they are about to go to.”

So, at the start of the presentation, chocolates were distributed to the audience to help maintain concentration levels! Faye continued: “I think it made everyone in the room relax ... I noticed a change in the way that people were sitting in the room ... and I think it sort of showed how our presentation was student-led as well and had very much a student aspect to it.”

For the second time within 24 hours, it seemed that food had brought people closer together!

VI. “I’ve got this idea but I’m open to hear everything ... you guys decide what you want to do and then we’ll figure it out”

There is perhaps one dominant theme that cuts through the whole narrative related to the planning and preparation of the presentation and the experience of the Symposium itself: the importance of listening to the student voice.

Interestingly, for Emily and Faye a key moment during the Symposium was the liquid café activity that formed the final part of the day. Emily comments:

I felt more comfortable as we sat around and we gave points in a discussion. That's where I felt like the hierarchy was really low because a lot of the staff were there asking the students, which was obviously us and a few other students, what we felt about these discussion points, and a lot of them were actually giving us feedback in that this was really useful, thank you, we hadn't thought of that ... that's where I felt like the complete hierarchy levelled out.

VII. Conclusion: “I don't think you realise until afterwards and you look back at it...”

A notable outcome of writing this essay, and in particular the need to think back to the Symposium experience and the research projects that preceded it, has been to highlight strongly the value of reflection as a process to draw out individual and collective learning. To some extent, this has served as a helpful reminder of personal development we recognised during the experiences themselves; in other instances, the gap between the experience and the time of writing has helped to draw out learning that we did not recognise at the time but that has become more apparent subsequently. For example, both Faye and Emily were reminded of the trepidation that they felt in the early stages of their URSS projects as they were allocated more responsibilities and experienced greater independence than they were used to, but now recognise the greater personal confidence these experiences afforded. The development of data collection, analysis, and storage skills were significant, with positive consequences for final year project design and execution. The Symposium also offered a significant opportunity to hone their communication skills, not least in terms of 'translating' quite complex scientific projects for a 'lay' audience.

Furthermore, this short, reflective essay has highlighted a range of factors that can contribute to effective, impactful, and rewarding partnerships between staff and students. Within the context of both the research projects and conference presentation, the pursuit of a common agreed-upon goal created a clear focus for the collaborative activities and opened up a space for students to become valued partners. This perception of value crystallised around a strong sense of inclusion, trust, honesty and a receptiveness to students as an equal voice in the research and presenting process. In all cases, staff seemed to display a sensitivity to the potential hierarchies that could emerge and sometimes actively employed tactics to offset this. Overall, it is both noteworthy and reassuring to recognise now that this essay has actually served to illustrate many of the values that Mick and Ruth Healey identified as integral to successful learning and teaching partnerships in the first keynote at the Symposium, i.e. authenticity, honesty, inclusivity, reciprocity, empowerment, trust, courage, plurality and responsibility. Some of these were fostered very deliberately, but others emerged more organically—a fusion of the circumstances, individual aspirations, and personalities involved—and more gradually over time.

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