From Student to Student Partner: Revisiting Student Expertise and Power in Curriculum Partnership

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FROM STUDENT TO STUDENT PARTNER: REVISITING STUDENT EXPERTISE AND POWER IN CURRICULUM PARTNERSHIP

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We have been colleagues in student-staff partnership (SSP) work at Western Sydney University (WSU), Australia, for just under four years, working initially in a team of staff, students, and external partners on a five-year, university-wide, strategic curriculum transformation project called 21C, and now on a suite of SSP projects with our team—the WSU Student Partners. Samuel started as a student partner in the third year of his Science and Business double degree just as COVID hit, and in early 2023, he became one of two Student Partner Coordinating Leads. Tai is the Academic Lead of Student-Staff Partnership and is a higher education researcher with an obsessive interest in critical university studies. We are both passionate SSP advocates, but our collective disposition is also towards criticality—in our case, puzzling through the multiple paradoxes involved in practising SSP. Most recently, we have started to think together on the challenge of how to grow SSP, and more specifically, on the institutional conditions that SSP needs to retain quality as a distinctive mode of engagement.

In August 2023, we sat down together at our Parramatta City campus to think and talk about Burke's (2013) essay, "Legitimizing Student Expertise in Student-Faculty Partnerships," published in *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education* a decade ago. What follows is a short extract of a longer conversation—a reflection and a set of musings—re-written and edited as a dialogue between us.

TAI: So, did you read Burke's paper? What did you reckon about it? I've read it a few times over the years and there are so many things in it that I react to which I really appreciate. I'd definitely love us to have a conversation with the author at some point.

SAMUEL: Well… it brought up things we've talked about in the past and it reminded me that this question of student expertise is a thing that's hard to answer. Why is it such a big deal in the SSP community that students are seen as experts? And it just raised more questions. Is expertise a reason to share power with students? And is power even the right way to look at it? Is competence better? Is expertise itself a valuable thing or is it that students also bring other forms of expertise unrelated to their student experience that makes partnership valuable? I sometimes think that broad question of student expertise isn't as interesting as it first seems.

TAI: Like you, I wonder a lot about expertise too. Assigning or encouraging someone to assume the status of being an 'expert' does a particular kind of work I reckon. Perhaps in universities, we are so used to trading in expertise that for students, their experiences need elevation to expertise because they won't be heard otherwise. This is what Alison Cook-Sather and Nandeeta Bala (2023) argue. Perhaps expertise is needed because staff can both desire, and dismiss, the raw-ness of experience and so the move to expertise

is strategic. I sort of understand it. Burke's paper also reminded me of that distinction we often make in our work between being a student and a student partner. She refers to them student consultants. But there's a shift isn't there? You notice it right?

SAMUEL: Yep, what I've noticed from our work—and one of our colleagues says this—is that a student partner seems more able to articulate their experience productively—to staff, to the university, into the context they're working in—and they do it in a way that adds value. That curiosity about others, about context, about how to add value, seems closer to expertise to me. I mean there's always inherent value and validity in students' experiences—in saying how we feel—but expertise seems like something different. I can also see that expertise gets demonstrated in the 'making' of something, and in our work, a lot of what we're trying to do with staff is to make better educational decisions and judgements. And I think that's tough for a student to see.

TAI: Here's a question. Do you reckon it's weird for students to be encouraged to see their experience as expertise? What does that invitation feel like?

SAMUEL: I think student expertise is a concept that's very hard for a student to even grasp because I feel like it's articulated from a staff member's point of view, and them deriving value from the student. Yeah, it's an unusual concept but I'm coming to see expertise as a necessary one—that work of taking the initiative, being productive, curious, and generous—but I don't know if students even see that as expertise! We should ask our team…

TAI: It's interesting… I do think expertise has a use—and its use-value is that students have a chance to step into a different, more expansive way of being a student. And sometimes you need a concept to 'think with' to help you make that leap. But as soon as you arrive there and you start interacting with staff in partnership and working together, you realise that your life experience as a student isn't always, or the only thing that enables the partnership to proceed—it's something else. One of the original student partners in our partnership program used to say to me that there was a point at which her student expertise reached its limit, and other things needed to kick in for her to feel like she was making a contribution.

SAMUEL: And maybe they're really fundamental things, Tai, like the ability to communicate, to negotiate, to think abstractly, and take things from one context of your student experience into another which can be challenging— these are all things that can be developed, by the way. I'd also say there's an element of creativity involved. One of the things I've learned in our partnership work is how important it is to be able to communicate and execute your ideas because it helps in being listened to. And I've been lucky with the design skills I have to do that quickly—to make a video, throw together a slide deck, a poster—whereas some of my colleagues have had to rely on others to do that for them. I'm starting to recognise how uneven that is.

TAI: But it's not just that either. I've come to rely heavily on your domain knowledge, too—especially the marketing expertise and nous you bring from your degree, and some of our student partner team bring other things too from their degrees—like human resources knowledge. I'm not expert at all in those things, and they've had a huge influence on how we work as a team—in the way you do partnership with me.

        Shall we touch briefly on expertise and power. And do some thinking with Burke on this?

SAMUEL: Here's a question for you, Tai. And Burke mentions it a lot, too. Why is power such a dominant and recurring theme in the SSP community?

TAI: Well, think about the place where we do SSP—it's the university—and it's western history tells us that they are places where contradictory concepts and claims intersect, like expertise, community, hierarchy, partnership, privilege, equity, inquiry, elitism, and transformation. That's a real jumble of different kinds of stuff, and inbuilt in each of those things I reckon are different versions of power. So, it's hard to escape power when you work in a university, and because of that, it's hard to escape it in SSP. And those concepts and practices organise the university experience for students in particular ways—mostly, students are kept at arm's length, treated as people who don't know things, and usually, they have the least power to change or influence those practices because they're not given the conceptual or material tools to do so. I see power as an analytical tool to help us diagnose what might be happening, and it's about finding the right version of it to analyse the right thing. Does that help at all?

SAMUEL: Yep, it does… but how does it relate to SSP? What does constantly talking about power, or understanding our SSP work through the lens of power, do for SSP?

TAI: I'd say SSP demands the re-arrangement power, and it becomes a lens to understand why SSP feels hard to achieve. But it also reminds us that universities are places filled with people who make decisions with the responsibilities, information, and resources they have at hand. And because of that, you realise the university is a place that is always amenable to change. It doesn't always feel like that—what you and I now understand as a 'possibility-space.' Part of our work is to support students in the conversation about change and to participate in co-creating it. Sounds very optimistic I know… people have told me that I have too optimistic a view of universities.

SAMUEL: It's one of the things I've learned in our partnership work—that move from transaction 'waiting to be told what to do,' to taking the initiative, to speaking up—even in a small way, to seeing possibility, to negotiate, to see change as possible, and to want to contribute to. But even when we do our best to create conditions—like SSP does—it's still hard for a student to do it because we make calculations all the time about whether the other person— the teacher or staff member—is curious. And if they're not, we don't tend to

speak up because it's not worth the effort. It's taken me a while, but I'm starting to see possibility more—a little bit at least…

TAI: I feel like that's your mode of operation now, Samuel—but maybe because you're puzzling over expertise and power—you don't use those concepts to understand your SSP practice or our workplace in that way. And maybe that's Burke's point—claiming student expertise gives you power to see possibility and go towards it. It's a treat to have an essay like Burke's to help us think our thoughts out loud. Don't you reckon?

SAMUEL: We should do this more often, Tai.

References

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