

Students as Partners as the Future of Student Engagement

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Introduction

In this opinion piece I offer a vision for student engagement as students as partners - a mind-set predicated on students and academics (faculty in North America) collaborating in meaningful partnerships that becomes a cultural norm within universities. In the context of 21st century universities that seek to graduate students with complex skillsets that extend far beyond knowledge acquisition, such a culture-shift is particularly relevant. The importance of developing language in fostering this transition from student engagement to students as partners is discussed. Students as partners offer a view of student engagement that is a joint endeavour to shape and influence university teaching and learning. The language of students as partners deliberately emphasises the relational and social elements of mutual learning. Engaging students and academics (faculty in North America) in collaborative partnerships is process-orientated, reflecting the dynamic and on-going nature of learning that should characterise higher education. This is the vision of student engagement in higher education for which I argue.

Student engagement

When I started working in the teaching and learning space in Australia ten years ago, the dominant discourse was on 'student engagement' and 'student experience' – what students did that could 'impact' their learning, and how universities 'involved' students in such activities. There was also a significant focus on how universities 'evidence' such engagement. Coates, in 2005, summarised student engagement by writing:

The concept of student engagement is based on the constructivist assumption that learning is influenced by how an individual participates in educationally purposeful activities. Learning is seen as a 'joint proposition'... which also depends on institutions and staff providing students with the conditions, opportunities and expectations to become involved. However, individual learners are ultimately the agents in discussions of engagement.
(p.26)

This attention on what students did, and their engagement with high impact learning activities made sense to me in 2005 and for many years following. What worries me now about student engagement is implicit in the last line from Coates, that 'individual learners are ultimately the agents in discussions of engagement.' The conversation around student engagement usually starts as 'joint proposition' in principle, whereby students and universities are both players in the engagement process. My experience, however, is that discussions quickly degenerate into deficit views of students who are not doing what they should be doing wed to an academics know

best notion of student engagement. Frustration amongst institutions arises again and again as many students remain disengaged despite institutional efforts to create conditions of engagement.

As student engagement has become a blanket term in higher education, the nuances have been the focus of many thoughtful scholars (for example of recent works see: Bryson, 2014; Dunne & Owen, 2013; Solomonides, Reid, & Petocz, 2012; Trowler, 2010). My own research explores what students think they learn from university in relation to what academics intend. I have found, repeatedly, that students are not experiencing the learning outcomes that academics anticipate (Dvorakova & Matthews, 2016; Matthews & Mercer-Mapstone, 2016; Mercer-Mapstone & Matthews, 2015; Varsavsky, Matthews & Hodgson, 2014). This suggests that engaging students is not enough. While students might be doing a plethora of engaging activities, many don't know why or for what purpose. This suggests a failure of institutions to sufficiently scaffold learning experiences, be them engaging or not, around tangible learning outcomes to connect otherwise fragmented and isolated curricular experiences. Trying to make sense of my research and offer sensible solutions to connect the distance between university educators and their students lead me into the students as partners arena.

The idea of more collaborative forms of engagement between students and academics (or whoever plays an educational role in universities) appeals to me. Engaging students and academics in conversations around curricular decisions and questions of learning invites students behind the scenes of higher education. Such dialogue provides valuable insight for academics into how students go about learning and make connections between disparate experiences. Partnership signals a willingness to make decisions together and co-create learning experiences in collaborations that go beyond conversations, harnessing the creativity and varying perspectives of both students and academics. Partnership reminds us of the shared goals of teaching and learning, inextricably linking learners and educators.

The recent language of students as partners as a process for student engagement brings together the ideas of many scholars seeking out a more relational form of student engagement.

Partnership is framed as a process of student engagement, understood as staff and students learning and working together to foster engaged student learning and engaging learning and teaching enhancement... It is a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself. (Healey et al., 2014, p. 7)

While students as partners is always about engaging students, Healey and colleagues (2014) argue that not all student engagement activities constitute students as partners. A new language is emerging that encompasses many existing practices and resonates with established learning frameworks but distinguishes itself from the broader, blanket, and often opaque terminology of student engagement.

Students as partners

Students as partners discourse focuses on student-academic partnerships as a process for engaging with rather than doing to or doing for students. The linchpin of

partnership is a relational process between students and academics/staff underpinned by a mindset – and an institutional culture that values the collaborative interaction between all members of the university community. Indeed, prominent scholars recently identified relationships in learning as core business in successful universities (Felten, Gardner, Schroeder, Lambert, & Barefoot, 2016). The specific goals of partnership feel less product-orientated than those of student engagement. One reason for this difference is the now well-established instruments that measure student engagement. Another explanation for the product-orientation of student engagement is that the language of engagement is outcomes focused while students as partners is process and values orientated (Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten, 2014; Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014; in press). Although students as partners practices are associated with specific outcomes or products, they are typically discussed in the context of both students and academics linked back to the process of engaging in partnership practices. While quantitative metrics have been posited to capture the benefits of students as partners on a larger scale, many questions link to values (Pauli, Raymond-Barker, & Worrell, 2016).

Scholars are characterising students as partners in careful ways to highlight the process-orientation and ways of thinking that underpin such practices (for example, Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014; Healey et al, 2014; in press). Partnership language is being crafted around the joint endeavour of learning predicated on mutually beneficial and rewarding collaborative learning experiences. It assumes students and teachers are both curious and able learners, albeit with varying levels of knowledge, capabilities, and with differing experiences. These differences are not a hindrance, however – just the opposite. It is this diversity that forms the foundation of fruitful partnerships in acknowledging that we bring different but equally valuable perspectives to the joint enterprise of education.

Partnerships in practice take shape around collaborative activities whereby students and academics/staff are:

- engaged in learning, teaching, curricula and assessment activities, and
- engaged in quality enhancement efforts to enhance the educational enterprise.

The Healey et al (2014; in press) students as partners model (Figure 2.3, p. 25) offers a useful typology to imagine the range of practical areas of partnership possibilities that can unfold within and beyond the assessed curriculum. As a heuristic device, the model suggests that partnerships can be purely grounded in subject-based learning activities (e.g. undergraduate research experiences), the scholarship of teaching and learning (e.g. co-authoring with students), pedagogy (e.g. peer assisted study sessions) or course design (e.g. co-creating curricular materials) culminating into a broader institutional ‘partnership learning community’. For a range of practical case studies of students as partners, see Healey’s collection of case studies (2016) and mine (Matthews, 2016). These examples reflect the breadth and scope of existing activities, revealing the creativity enabled through engaging students and academics in collaborative partnerships, which can be contextualised to meet the needs of individuals, disciplines, and institutions.

The language of partnership

If we shift our thinking about student engagement toward students as partners, the emphasis is on the relationship between students and academics/staff – positioning both as being essential players in the learning enterprise. My work in Australia has found that folks here like the language of collaboration and terminology that mentions both staff (academic and professional staff) and students. And language matters. Finding the words and stories that resonate with local institutions is an essential first step in developing a shared understanding of the culture of partnerships. While student engagement will remain with us, the new language and ethos of engaging students as partners (or engaging students and staff in collaborative partnerships) to shape teaching and learning together offers fresh opportunities to re-imagine student engagement.

The risks of maintaining engagement as a student product that is orchestrated by universities are manifold. In the 21st century higher education context, graduates are facing uncertain employment prospects in an increasingly complex, messy, and interconnected world. If universities can reasonably expect to deliver on claims of graduating problem-solving, enterprising, capable, and thoughtful citizens of the world, then our approach to engaging students has to be predicated on valuing students as capable, collaborative partners in their own learning. This means students having curricula choices, opportunities to co-create their learning opportunities, and a place at the metaphoric table where decisions about teaching and learning are made at the course, degree program, and institutional levels. This means moving beyond student engagement to a mind-set of partnerships.

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