1.2
The relationship between research-based education and student–staff partnerships

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Research-based education and student–staff partnerships are both in vogue at the moment. Evidence suggests that both can enhance student learning experiences but how do the two relate? Is it possible or desirable to use them in conjunction with each other? In this chapter, I show that their pedagogy and politics are compatible. They have common benefits and challenges. At times they overlap but neither fully embraces the other. In short, the links between the two are tangled. In this chapter, I show how they can work together to strengthen each other and how the R=T initiative adds a new dimension to efforts to take the two agendas forward together.

1. What do we mean by research-based education and students as partners?

Students can engage with research and inquiry in four different ways (Healey and Jenkins 2009): they can learn about current research (research-led); they can develop research skills and techniques (research-orientated); they can learn through research and inquiry (research-based); and they can engage in research discussions (research-tutored). Healey and Jenkins (2009) characterise research-based learning as focusing on the research process with students as active participants. Although they did not prioritise any particular form of engagement with research, they noted that students generally do not spend enough time
as participants in relation to research (i.e. undertaking research-tutored and research-based activities).

Student–staff partnership is acknowledged to be extremely difficult to pinpoint. As Liz Dunne (2016) points out there are many definitions available. Healey et al. define it ‘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’ (Healey et al. 2014, 7, emphasis in original). An alternative definition is that of Cook-Sather et al., who describe it as: ‘A collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways’ (Cook-Sather et al. 2014, 6–7).

Student–staff partnerships are therefore processes whereby students and staff work together to achieve common goals. There need not be equal responsibility or liability between the partners (QAA 2012, 5) because students are not pedagogical or disciplinary experts (Wenstone 2012, 3; Cook-Sather et al. 2014). However, power does need to be distributed towards students so that they can make an equal contribution through their expertise in the student experience (Cook-Sather et al. 2014).

Staff–student partnership can look very different in practice because of the variety of outcomes that the partners are aiming to achieve. Healey et al. (2014, 23) created a framework for understanding student–staff partnerships in the domain of learning and teaching, where they could occur in learning, teaching and assessment; curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy; subject-based research and inquiry; and/or the scholarship of teaching and learning.

It should be noted that students and staff simply working together in these areas does not necessarily constitute student–staff partnership working. As Allin (2014, 98) points out students tend to be treated as novice researchers, that require facilitation and so the normal power relationships remain. Similarly, Cook-Sather et al. (2014, 138) argue that where students are involved in the research of staff, the staff member’s agenda tends to dominate. They thus characterise this as collaboration rather than partnership. Power has not been appropriately distributed to enable equal contribution in these cases.

Bovill and Bulley’s (2011) adaptation of Arnstein’s ladder of participation to one of student participation in curriculum design is useful for showing that active participation exists on a continuum and that it is possible to go beyond partnership to areas where students dominate. One such case is that of Exeter’s ‘Students as Change Agents’ scheme.
This scheme provided the opportunity for students to define and carry out their own research project into their own learning experiences in order to bring about positive change. Dunne and Zandstra (2011) purposely positioned the scheme beyond partnership, arguing that partnership work tended to be university-driven, rather than student-driven. In this case, students participating in the scholarship of teaching and learning is not partnership because the power has shifted over to the students.

2. What is the relationship between research-based education and student–staff partnership?

2.1 Moving forward together

Research-based education and student–staff partnerships are both processes, and the two can occur at the same time: students and staff can work in partnership on research-based education. However, as noted above, the one does not imply the other. A good example of the two occurring together is the research that Hasok Chang and his undergraduates undertook to collectively investigate the history of chlorine. Chang wrote that ‘students take ownership of their research projects, but they are strongly directed by the teacher and by their predecessors’ (Chang 2005, 388). While he guided their work, he was not an expert in the area and often had to tell them he did not know the answers to their questions. Their predecessors influenced the work, as their research was passed down between years. Thus the collaboration was not just between the member of staff and individual students but also between each other.

The example above is of partnership in subject-based research, but research-based education can also occur in the scholarship of learning and teaching. Cook-Sather et al. (2014) record how students in partnerships develop their meta-cognitive awareness by enquiring with staff into teaching and learning practices. As such, research-based activity is occurring in partnership into teaching practice. The SALT initiative at Bryn Mawr College provides a good example of this taking place in practice. Students learn about how they and others learn through their inquiry with staff into the best ways of teaching their courses.

Another common relationship between the two is for research-based education to be the goal of the student–staff partnership work. This is the case for UCL ChangeMakers projects, which are intended to forward research-based education (Marie et al. 2016). One example can be found in a project that developed both 3D models of a range of organs.
and a guide to creating 3D models, so that students could use these to explore the anatomy of different organs (http://www.3d-med.co.uk/about.html).

2.2 Compatible pedagogies

Partnership work and research-based education are both forms of active learning (Bonwell and Eison 1991). Prince says ‘active learning requires students to do meaningful learning activities and think about what they are doing’ (Prince 2004, 223). This can be clearly seen in partnership work, where students are actively involved in the process of learning and working together (Healey et al. 2014). Research-based education is also a form of active learning, whereby students are strongly involved in their learning and learn to reflect on the research process.

Both research-based education and student–staff partnerships also have strong links to andragogic assumptions. Knowles (1984) outlines five assumptions about adult learning. The second of these is that adults bring their own experiences to the educational arena. Student–staff partnership is premised on the principle that students are experts in the student experience (Cook-Sather et al. 2014). Their experiences are thus the foundation for partnership work, and its utility can be threatened by over-training them, as they risk losing their student perspective. Knowles gives the examples of laboratory experiences, field experiences and problem-solving projects (all forms of research-based exercises) as examples of techniques that draw on the learner’s existing experiences.

These existing experiences also cause problems for learning – as Knowles (1984) points out, adults sometimes have to unlearn habitual ways of thinking. Research-based education should encourage this through the development of critical thinking (see Section 2.4, Common benefits). Both research-based education and partnership work can challenge existing preconceptions about the roles of teachers and students, as discussed in Section 2.5, Challenges, and so can help both students and staff to unlearn fixed and unhelpful conceptions of these roles.

Knowles’s first assumption is that the learner is self-directing. The research process is self-directing; although the problem to be solved may be set, inquiry is contingent by its nature and students are likely to take the research in different directions, according to their interests. It is highly likely that partnerships will be self-directing for the same reasons. However, it is a particularly strong feature of partnerships that negotiate the curriculum, such as at Queen Margaret University in Edinburgh, where the students and academic staff negotiated the content of modules.
on an Environmental Justice degree, to ensure that the students developed the skills that they required for their environmental campaigns (Bovill et al., 2011). This particular example is noteworthy, for it also highlights Knowles’s assumption regarding orientation to learning, whereby students enter education settings to learn ‘in order to be able to perform a task, solve a problem, or live in a more satisfying way’ (Knowles 1984, 12).

Research-based education additionally taps into Knowles’s assumption that adult learners tend to be more motivated by intrinsic rewards as research draws on students’ curiosity. Many of the rewards of partnership work are also intrinsic, with students gaining a feeling of enrichment and fulfilment from undertaking work to benefit others. Students participating in UCL ChangeMakers projects have said: ‘Overall, it has been an incredibly enriching experience for me’ and that they derived ‘the satisfaction of contributing towards enriching the experiences of UCL’s student community’.

2.3 Compatible politics

Research-based education and student–staff partnership are both compatible with the concept of participatory democracy, whereby opportunities are created to allow citizens to make meaningful contributions to decision making. Participatory democracy shifts the power from the elite to the population. The relationship between democracy and student–staff partnership is perhaps more obvious: such a partnership is about opening up opportunities for students to contribute to decision making with regards to their learning and teaching (or in another area). Research-based education also shifts the power from an elite (the researchers) to the student population and involves students in making more decisions about their learning. Furthermore, modern participatory democracies require citizens to be able to make decisions in a super-complex world, where the frameworks we have for making sense are themselves disputed. Research-based education provides the critical thinking and skills required to cope and make decisions in such a world (Brew 2006).

At the same time that Higher Education is undergoing a process of massification, it is also becoming strongly influenced by neo-liberal economics, whereby universities are positioned within a marketplace to attract student-consumers. Although there are benefits to this economic model, such as a focus on improving the quality of teaching, it stands in opposition to the idea that learning takes place through the active participation of students with their learning, as described above. Rachel
Wenstone wrote in the National Union of Students’ *A manifesto for partnership* in 2012:

> Conceiving of students as consumers is a thoroughly impoverished way of describing the relationship between students and their institutions . . . A narrative of ‘competition’ and ‘choice’ within a consumer model offers students a false and inflated perception of their power and encourage [sic] the mind-set of ‘the customer is always right’ . . . [it] reduces complex interactions to mere transactions and de-values the role and expertise of educators. The consumer model could create a dangerous imbalance . . . student satisfaction is substituted for learning. (Wenstone 2012, 5)

Instead, Wenstone argued for student partnership, where students had the power to co-create knowledge, learning *and*, importantly, the higher education institution. Carey’s (2013) analysis of students as participants in curriculum design is interesting in showing that partnership work is affected by the consumerism model and that students sometimes act as consumers because that is the role expected of them. However, he also shows that students do not only act as consumers; the students who participated in the design exercise did so out of altruistic motives. My own work with students has shown that treating students as partners can change their attitudes towards themselves:

> UCL ChangeMakers allowed me to step forward, from an educational consumer to an active participant in UCL.

> Whereas before I think I was content to be a consumer . . . of education here at UCL, the UCL ChangeMakers projects has allowed me to conceive myself in a producing role.

As research-based education is also a form of active learning, it stands in an awkward position with regard to students as consumers and the politics of research-based education can be configured against neo-liberal economics. Neary and Winn write:

> The point of this re-arrangement would be to reconstruct the student as producer: undergraduate students working in collaboration with academics to create work of social importance that is full of academic content and value, while at the same time reinvigorating the university beyond the logic of market economics. (Neary and Winn 2009, 193)
Here students work in partnership with staff to undertake research-based activity in order to create a university that thereby gains a purpose beyond monetary value and the employability of its students. Fung (2016, 31) has also argued that the philosophy behind her model of research-based education is Bildung, the idea that education is about developing oneself as a human being with a concern for the common good.

However, it is important to note that research-based education does not need to be based on a politics that opposes neo-liberal economics in higher education. The former Chief Executive of the Higher Education Academy, Paul Ramsden, wrote:

> [Curricula should all:] Incorporate research-based study for undergraduates (to cultivate awareness of research careers, to train students in research skills for employment, and to sustain the advantages of a research–teaching connection in a mass or universal system). (Ramsden 2008, 11)

Here, the emphasis is on research-based education for employability. Students are thus gaining monetary worth through being educated via research-based methods, and as such this is a neo-liberal economic argument. Although this was written as a contribution to the UK Government's Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills' Debate on the Future of Higher Education, it shows that the politics of research-based education are not fixed and that this pedagogy can be used to further different political ends.

I believe that student–staff partnership can also be deployed in support of neo-liberal economic politics. At UCL we invited students and staff to work in partnership specifically in departments with National Student Survey (NSS) results that are lower than the average across the university. The following year, overall NSS satisfaction scores rose on average by 5.0 per cent in those departments. Thus, partnership can be a process towards increasing student satisfaction, and it would be surprising to me if it did not have a positive impact. Nevertheless, the NSS is commonly portrayed as a tool of student consumerism, prioritising satisfaction over learning, and providing information to enable students to choose between universities in the marketplace (Crawford 2012).

Carey (2013) argues that the market ideology within higher education provides one of the challenges for student–staff partnership work, as students act in the ways expected of them and use the opportunity to complain rather than to undertake the type of design thinking Dunne (2016) describes as effective partnership working. Nevertheless, if we
are to accept that ‘managerial principles . . . define contemporary higher education’ (Carey 2013, 258), I believe we should be pragmatic in our approach. If we can deliver better student satisfaction at the same time as enhancing learning and delivering the benefits discussed in the following section, that cannot be a bad thing.

2.4 Common benefits

Both research-based education and student–staff partnership increase student motivation, confidence and attainment among those who take part (Healey and Jenkins, 2009; Cook-Sather et al., 2014). UCL ChangeMakers students describe the experience of partnership as transformative: ‘ChangeMakers was indeed a changing experience for me. It made the academic year much richer, improved my understanding and provided key insights I otherwise would not have gained.’ The work of Brooman et al. (2015) also suggests that partnership working should enhance the educational outcomes for others. They show that student attainment improved as a result of listening to and responding to the student voice in curriculum design. The focus groups run during the project challenged a number of staff assumptions and thus one would expect student partnership to offer the same benefits.

Both research-based education and student–staff partnerships are good for community building. Research-based education helps to create inclusive knowledge building communities because students are welcomed into the world of research where staff normally reside, rather than being excluded from it (Brew 2006). This induction into the research community also improves professional socialisation (Healey and Jenkins 2009). The students who participate in partnership work through UCL ChangeMakers have reported a stronger sense of community with their department and engagement with their studies: ‘I genuinely feel more involved with the department and my academic studies.’ ‘It gives me opportunities to explore my department deeper [sic] which enhances my sense of belonging to my course.’

Brew (2006) argues that to cope in an increasingly uncertain world people require a strong sense of identity. Cook-Sather et al. (2014) describe how student–staff partnerships can develop this for both students and staff. From the student perspective, this can be about developing a sense of themselves as responsible for their own learning, whereas for staff it may be about being confronted with who they are and how they differ from some of their students. Learning through inquiry will encourage students to query who they are and will strengthen their sense
of self, particularly as they engage with the community of researchers in their discipline (Brew 2006). Part of this process of self-discovery arises from the more equitable power relationships in both student–staff partnerships and research-based education, which removes the imposition of identity onto students by staff.

2.5 Challenges

One of the major challenges to both research-based education and student–staff partnerships is devolving power sufficiently to students. The appropriate distribution of power for partnership is one of the values that Healey et al. (2014) highlight for partnership work. However, as Cook-Sather et al. (2014) discuss, this is easier said than done. The balance of power should not shift to the students, nor should there be equivalency: partners should be equally valued but their different areas of expertise recognised. When this happens, it should be possible to agree whose opinion should have more weight in any decision and who should contribute more to a specific area of the joint undertaking. A further challenge comes from the fact that staff usually initiate partnerships, so there can be a danger of the process feeling to students as if it is being imposed upon them. The opening up of research to the student population also involves a shift in power from staff to students. As discussed above, when students are excluded from it, research helps to define the staff as elite. By being more inclusive, staff have to devolve more power to students. The shift in power for both research-based education and student–staff partnerships comes about through a recognition that ‘different participants have different things to contribute as well as to learn’ (Brew 2006, 163).

Both student–staff partnerships and research-based education change the role of staff. In research-based education the staff become facilitators of learning. Cook-Sather (2014) has argued that student–staff partnerships transform concepts of student and staff roles. As one of the UCL ChangeMakers staff partners wrote:

from a staff perspective, having to think beyond the traditional divide and working with students as truly equal partners can bring vital insights for individuals that may well lead to lasting culture change across the institution.

This can be troublesome and threatening for staff (Cook-Sather 2014) and challenging for students. Carey (2013) discusses how students act out conceptions of them as consumers and Fung (2016) points out that students can find research-based education unsettling.
As discussed in Section 2.3, Compatible politics, both research-based education and student–staff partnership fall more naturally into opposition with neo-liberal economics and this poses a challenge for them both. Separate funding and evaluation of research and teaching strengthens the divide between the two (Brew 2006). Partnerships are inhibited by managerialist principles, which hold staff to account and prevent the flexibility to respond rapidly to student needs (Crawford 2012; Carey 2013). Student input can become meaningless if it is sought through evaluative surveys as these are too late to impact on the students’ own experiences and therefore encourage a culture of complaint.

3. Conclusion

Research-based education and student–staff partnership share many aims, benefits and challenges. The two are overlapping, with some research-based education being a form of partnership (but not all) and some partnerships being in the area of research-based education.

As they advance the same educational aims and contribute to the same cultural shifts in higher education, I think it makes sense for the two to try to move forward together. At UCL this is done through both partnership in research-based education and partnership towards it. Partnership on project work, aimed at making the curriculum more research-based is not unusual. The R=T initiative is a slightly different form of partnership, in that students contributed to staff development workshops that were targeted at inspiring staff to relate teaching and research more closely in their practice; the students then researched how the ideas could be applied in practice.

The real lesson of the R=T initiative to me is not that of a new model to follow, but that there are likely to be other areas where we could productively develop student–staff partnerships in aid of research-based education. Mick Healey once said to me that if we want to take student partnership seriously then we need to keep asking the question ‘Where are the students?’ The R=T initiative demonstrates the power that that question can have.

References


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