As an American doctoral student studying British higher education, I am uniquely placed as both an insider and an outsider. Not only am I a student reflecting on the process of higher education while studying it, I am also an international student coming from outside the British context. Throughout my educational career, I have had many different experiences that have not only shaped my interest and passion in higher education; they have also shaped me as a person. I have had the opportunity to engage in student–staff partnership in several contexts, inspiring a love for education and research. One such opportunity occurred while getting my bachelor degree in California, where I had a research internship with a professor. This experience taught me a multitude of research skills, while also inspiring me to go on to further study. When starting my masters in the UK, I was surprised by the lack of student–staff partnership in a research-oriented psychology of education programme. Despite this I went on to pursue a PhD at UCL, where I once again had the opportunity to get involved in a student–staff partnership through UCL ChangeMakers.

Reflecting on my experience with student–staff partnership as an undergraduate, I can now see how important it was in shaping my future. I learned so much about the process of doing research, and gained an appreciation of how knowledge is socially constructed and that truth is sometimes hard to pin down. Now I see that the process that I was engaged in was a cycle of theory, action and reflection, or praxis. Praxis is a process wherein people can apply a theory to their actions, and then reflect upon those actions; this is then fed into new theories for future
actions. This is a process that staff and students engage in when participating in research-based education. As staff conduct research with students they apply a theory to their practice, and then reflect upon that approach. Students can help with this process as well, by giving feedback to staff and exploring pedagogy together (Cook-Sather 2014). Students engage in praxis in research-based education as they apply the knowledge learned in class to their research project and then reflect on the process, or how it has changed their thinking about their subject. Being involved in the production of knowledge through research-based education can encourage students to develop a critical awareness of how knowledge is created and socially situated, with a view to encouraging critical reflection on how they have been moulded by their own experiences (Kincheloe and Steinberg, 1998a).

A significant amount of the literature on research-based education focuses on the instrumental reasons for engaging students in research–increased student engagement, increased retention of knowledge, development of research skills and preparation for the workforce. Although I do not wish to detract from the importance of those outcomes, I want to focus on the transformative aspects of research-based education and student–staff partnership – how using these approaches in higher education can lead to a change in thinking for students and staff, and can inspire students to become change agents (Kincheloe and Steinberg, 1998b; Cousin 2010). Cook-Sather (2014) suggests research partnerships are threshold concepts, in that they provide opportunities for change in action and mindset, asking staff and students to engage in situations that might seem contrary to ‘common knowledge’ or common ways of doing things, like letting students teach. Engaging with threshold concepts can be ‘productively disruptive’, threatening and transformative (Cousin 2010; Cook-Sather 2014). Transformation takes place when staff and students display ‘an ontological as well as a conceptual shift’ (Cousin 2010, 2). This can occur through critical reflection or dialogue with others.

1. Research-based education: Encouraging student–staff partnership

Collaborating on research can encourage students (and staff) to question the traditional power dynamic in education. This is a trend throughout this book, mentioned in all of the 11 student chapters. In Jawiria Naseem’s chapter (2.10) on connecting graduates with the real world, she points out that as research-based education is more student-focused
than traditional transmission methods of teaching, it makes a step toward creating a more equal dynamic between staff and students. Similarly, in reference to Bryn Mawr’s SaLT programme, Cook-Sather (2014) reflects on the changing dynamic between staff and students when students are employed as curriculum and pedagogical consultants. Researching around this threshold concept of having students consult on teaching led both students and staff to engage in critical reflection about the roles of teachers and students. Although not all staff were able to transform their perception of students as partners, many of the staff members identified partnership with students as ‘productively disruptive’ (Cook-Sather 2014, 190). Some teachers found giving up their power too difficult, especially when students have so little experience with teaching or knowledge about education, aside from their experience as students. Cook-Sather (2014) suggests that ‘if faculty can recognize students as differently situated knowers with insights to share as partners in exploration but not ultimate authorities’, they can experience a fundamental shift in how they perceive the contributions of students (2014, 191). You will see this echoed in this book, where student editors identified the need for both staff and students engaged in partnership to realise and appreciate the value of each other’s input for the partnership to be successful.

Learning through research-based education can encourage student–staff partnership, but even in situations where students and staff do not collaborate on research projects, engaging in the research process can help put staff and students on a more equal footing. When students have the experience of producing knowledge themselves, instead of passively receiving it, they may learn to appreciate that no one knows it all, and in some situations, students may even know more than staff. For example, in 2.6, Eirini Gallou talks about the use of technology in research-based education, and how this interaction can help challenge the traditional hierarchical relationship between staff and students. Using technology in the classroom sometimes puts students in the role of teacher if the staff member is not technologically fluent, or can create environments where students can take on a more equal role in the class, such as sharing resources or engaging in a discussion with peers on Moodle, or developing videos to teach others about physics research at UCL (3.7).

If students are included as legitimate co-producers of knowledge, this interaction can create a space where genuine dialogue can take place, further enforcing a change in the hierarchical dynamic between staff and students. In 2.3, Ellen Pilsworth suggests that dialogue in research-based education can lead to a more equal partnership between...
staff and students, where students and staff both benefit from learning together and receiving feedback from their research partners. However, just involving students in research is not enough – to be a true partnership, students need to be involved from the beginning. Several authors have come up with different models to conceptualise levels of student participation (Arnstein 1969; Healey and Jenkins 2006). These models help distinguish between involving students in a tokenistic way as opposed to being true partners (Arnstein 1969), although Healey and Jenkins’ (2006) model looks more at how research is used in the curriculum, differentiating between students as participants or as an audience. I think these models can help both staff and students realise that there is more to research-based education and student–staff partnership than just working on projects together – other dynamics come into play, specifically regarding power and choice. For example, Ira Shor (1996) points out that power-sharing empowers students and instils a critical awareness of the benefits of challenging the boundaries between knowledge producers and knowledge consumers, as well as other dynamics that may be taken for granted. This will empower students to take ownership of their education and give them the power to shape it, rather than just accept it as it is (Shor 1996, 200). This view is echoed in 2.8, where Preeti Vivek Mishra touches on the importance of involving students in a deconstruction of subject knowledge in order to inspire them to rethink dominant knowledge. Mishra also questions the purpose of higher education, stating that it should lead to empowerment, emancipation and critical reflection.

2. Research-based education: Research as a critical exercise

Students who are involved in research-based education learn a lot about the process of doing research and are more likely to see it as just that – a process. As Sabrina Peters argues in 2.2, where she writes about a student research blog, engaging with research promotes the idea of research as a process rather than just an end result. Viewing research in this way not only shows students that mistakes are a part of the research process and offer important learning opportunities, but it also moves away from the instrumentalist way of thinking about learning. Engaging in research-based education also involves students as co-producers of knowledge, transforming them from consumers of knowledge to creators. This process can be emancipatory and transformative, as students begin to realise
what it is like to be a knowledge-producer, possibly leading them to question and become aware of how other knowledge is created. For example, in 2.1 Ahmet Alptekin Topcu talks about how engaging in research-based education can show students that there is usually more than one way to answer a question, and definitely more than one way to arrive at an answer. Teaching through research shows students that failure is not the end, or necessarily a bad thing – many revolutionary and innovative ideas have come from ‘mistakes’. It also shows students that knowledge is not created in a vacuum. Approaches to problems, or even the questions that researchers are trying to answer, are all influenced by social and political factors that play a role in the production of knowledge. Further, ‘Research becomes a way of life, a way of approaching the world. In line with higher orders of cognition, those who embrace critical research view answers as tentative – findings are always in process’ (Kincheloe and Steinberg, 1998b, 241). This speaks to the realisation that knowledge is always changing and being built upon, and may be context specific. Students engaged in research are more aware of this because they see, as mentioned in 2.1, that there is often more than one answer, or that researchers are constantly building upon and sometimes disproving previous research.

Teachers engaging in research with students may also view knowledge in a different way. Agathe Ribéreau-Gayon, in 2.4, claims that teachers doing research are more likely to see knowledge as evolving, whereas teachers who are not engaged in research may be more likely to see and portray to students that knowledge is fixed and should be ‘consumed’ without question. She goes on to say ‘I believe developing this integrated, active, research-based teaching approach is crucial for students to understand the limitations of knowledge and education, and for them to appreciate the research process’. Mishra (2.8) agrees, stating that establishing a dialectical relationship between research and teaching through research-based education inducts students into a culture of critiquing disciplinary knowledge. This also relates to what Light and Calkins (2014, 347) referred to as ‘teaching by modeling critical enquiry’.

3. Research-based education: Engaging staff and students in praxis

Taking part in a research partnership can be beneficial for both students and staff. The majority of the student–staff partnership and research-based education literature seems to focus on the benefits for
the students, in an aim to improve the student experience and student engagement. This focus may be a factor in deterring staff from getting involved in student–staff partnerships, because all they see is more work and giving up their authority in the classroom with no obvious benefit for them. Others may find it hard to see the value in student perceptions on curriculum and pedagogy due to lack of experience or knowledge, missing out on a uniquely situated perspective of the classroom. Cook-Sather (2014) uses the reflections of staff to demonstrate that although student–staff partnership can be a troublesome threshold concept, staff as well as students benefit from this work. Not only did staff gain a critical awareness of their pedagogy through interaction with student consultants, they also gained insight into the student perspective, and how students experience their classrooms. This can lead to an improvement of teaching practice, as well as a desire to partner more with students on projects outside the classroom. One staff member said that participating in the partnership ‘made her a better scholar, as well as teacher, as it allowed her to integrate the various dimensions of her identity – indeed, to co-construct them with students’ (Cook-Sather 2014, 192).

This process of praxis – theory, action, reflection – occurs in both students and staff when they engage in student–staff partnership. Wasley (2007) discusses a project at Bringham Young University (USA) where students act as pedagogical consultants, offering staff the opportunity to see their course through the eyes of the student consultant, and giving students the chance to approach learning in a different way. Students involved in the process said that after being involved in the programme they had more empathy for their professors, and also realised that they were experiencing their own classes in a different way. One benefit of this kind of interaction is that students learn more about how they are learning, or they think about thinking, also known as meta-cognition. Students who develop meta-cognition through student–staff partnership and research-based education are more likely to have the opportunity to reflect on what they want from education, and what they need to do in order to make those changes. Students as researchers could ask of the curriculum, or of education more broadly, ‘What is worth knowing here? How do we come to know it? . . . What benefits do we derive from knowing it? What can we see or do as a result of gaining a specific understanding that we were unable to see and do before?’ (Kincheloe and Steinberg, 1998b, 238). Students engaged in research-based education may also transfer these critical thoughts from their academic lives into their everyday lives, as discussed in Sharp et al. (2009). As student authors reflected
on their transformative experience of research-based education, they said ‘we no longer viewed thinking as an activity best conducted for the enhancement of grades; thinking could also provide a foundation for the interrogation of everyday activities making us critically aware of our surroundings’ (2009, 375).

For staff and students, engaging in research-based education and student–staff partnership requires a change in the way they think about teaching and learning, as well as their assumptions about how higher education should work. As Fielding (2004) puts it: ‘Transformation requires a rupture of the ordinary and this demands as much of teachers as it does students. Indeed, it requires a transformation of what it means to be a student; what it means to be a teacher’ (2004, 296). Engaging with this ‘threshold concept’ (Cook-Sather 2014) means that staff and students will have to interrogate and possibly change the way they have previously viewed higher education and the staff–student dynamic to make way for a new kind of pedagogy. Aside from the transformative (and often troublesome) aspects of this endeavour, staff and students still have to simultaneously manage institutional constraints, societal expectations, and a lack of resources in the university. This can make a drastic change in pedagogy very challenging on a practical level, and would be difficult without the support of the institution in which the changes are being made. This was a sentiment expressed by many of the authors in this book, as well as the student editorial team.

4. Students in student–staff partnership: agents for change

Praxis is a cycle, which means it doesn’t just end with reflection. As students engage in student–staff partnership and research-based education, they enter a cycle of ‘interpretation and action’ (Cook-Sather 2014) which encourages them to reflect on knowledge (or theory) in action. The development of student voice is a trend in student–staff partnership research, looking at how student–staff partnership can empower students to realise that they have valid and valuable opinions and knowledge, and how they can use these to affect change. However, student–staff partnership that is not authentic and does not involve students in a more equitable relationship where they have a voice and power becomes tokenistic and can be more harmful than helpful. Projects that take advantage of students and manipulate them while ignoring their valuable input fall to the bottom rung of Arnstein’s (1969) ladder of participation. Arnstein’s framework is
a helpful tool when thinking about student participation, as it encourages both students and staff involved in projects to reflect on whether their project involves true partnership. This is important because ‘transformation is more likely to reside in arrangements which require the active engagement of students and teachers working in partnership than those which . . . treat student voice as an instrument of teacher . . . purposes’ (Fielding 2004, 306). Sharp et al. (2011) found that students engaged in authentic student–staff partnership were empowered to take on leadership positions and challenge the status quo. This was perhaps because once students realised they had a voice, and what it felt like to make a difference, they were more likely to want to get involved in student government, student representation and student committees. The students involved said ‘Our voices were developed academically, empowering our intrinsic abilities to formulate our ideas into action’ (Sharp et al. 2011). Students engaged in student–staff partnership are perhaps more likely to question the status quo of higher education, and realise that students as well as staff can make productive changes to the way things are. Mishra supports this view in 2.8, where she asserts that deconstructing where knowledge comes from and who created it may give students the opportunity to engage in projects to rethink dominant knowledge and ‘muster the courage to change it’. In 2.1, Topcu highlights how students who were encouraged to take ownership of their education through the more active learning strategies involved in research-based education were more likely to feel motivated to get involved in making changes through programmes such as UCL ChangeMakers.

5. Conclusion: Research-based education as transformative

To conclude this chapter, I would like to look at how engaging in research-based education and student–staff partnership can be transformative for both staff and students, and the impact this could have on higher education. However, I also want to look at the challenges involved in performing and planning research-based education and student–staff partnership. Finally, I will reflect on my own experience of beginning to challenge the status quo and how this has led to my involvement in student–staff partnership projects and student-led initiatives.

Based on the amount of research done on research-based education and student–staff partnership, it is clear that staff as well as students are interested in making higher education a place for more equitable
collaboration, transformation and empowerment. Much of the research mentioned here focuses on the use of research-based education and student–staff partnership in a more holistic way, rather than the more instrumentalist approach, which focuses on the development of skills for the workforce or improving student satisfaction for the sake of university league tables. As British higher education becomes increasingly marketised, these programmes may become more and more instrumentalised, stripping away their transformative and empowering intentions. For this reason, I argue that it may be more effective to empower students to fight for these changes. In this marketised system, the ‘student-consumer’ has a lot of power – student satisfaction is an important metric when it comes to the ranking of universities. Therefore, if students demand more staff–student research collaboration, more space for conducting research, more funding for student initiatives, they may actually be heard. Students can use this system to their advantage to make the changes they think are important.

The aim of involving students in research-based education and student–staff partnership, and therefore praxis, is not to produce a student who knows everything or knows more than other students. Instead, the aim is to encourage students to listen to those who have been marginalised and learn from them, and realise that the dominant view is not the only way to approach the world.

Kincheloe and Steinberg (1998a) assert that ‘a good education should prepare students as researchers who can “read the world” in such a way so they can not only understand it but so they can change it’ (1998a, 2). They continue, by summarising the empowering effect research-based education and student–staff partnership can have on students as the potential to ‘gain a power literacy – that is, the ability to recognise the ways power operates to create oppressive conditions for some groups and privilege for others. Thus, students as researchers gain new ways of knowing and producing knowledge that challenge the common sense views of reality with which most individuals have grown so comfortable’ (Kincheloe and Steinberg, 1998a, 2). I think that developing this kind of critical student researcher is particularly important in our knowledge society, where people have instant access to infinite information on the Internet and social media and the authority of the university as a knowledge producer is in decline (Høstaker and Vabø 2005). Although the Internet has undoubtedly opened access to many people who may not have previously been exposed to this knowledge, many do not have the capacity to differentiate between fact and fiction, or critically evaluate what they are reading.
My research is on the use of critical pedagogy in higher education, which, in a way, looks at how staff can engage in praxis to make their classrooms more critical, and encourage students to model these practices. As such, a lot of the reading I do for my research is based on the deconstruction of knowledge and examining how social and political contexts shape our world and the status quo in which we operate. It is through this reading and thinking that I have been empowered to get involved in my university through student-led initiatives like UCL ChangeMakers and this student editor project. Although I understand the challenges associated with student–staff partnership, and the difficulty that both staff and students encounter because of our socially constructed perceptions and expectations of education, I feel that getting involved in these projects can not only make a difference in its own right, but in the case of R=T, I hope the projects will inspire other students to fight for changes in their own universities.

References