Shaping Higher Education with Students

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• Ellen introduces dialogue as an under-rated and under-utilised facet of student–staff partnership. Her emphasis is on moving away from the traditional unidirectional teacher-to-student relationship of knowledge delivery and, by drawing on Freire’s work, she proposes a participatory, dialogical process that fosters student participants as equal partners.

The dialogue she advocates is not merely literal, as may often be perceived, but in fact connotes a metaphorical dialogue within the relevant discipline, such as the process of its development, which presents opportunities for exploration, systematisation and analysis, thereby culminating in the learner engaging in the development of knowledge and not simply receiving it from the teacher. Demonstrating this in the context of translation, which is an important component of language education, she suggests that significant and reflective research is required in order to identify the potential for embedding dialogue across disciplines.

• The challenge of insufficient communication, be it between students and staff, between departments, as well from the university has been emphasised time and again, and against this backdrop the ‘R=T=dialogue’ certainly seems to offer a valuable alternative. However, how does the concept translate into practice?

Ellen’s exemplification in the context of translation provides a formidable case in point, but it also indicates the requirement of a
significant shift in mindset and practice from staff. This shift is in fact a necessary predecessor to working with student partners in all contexts, given that the relationship is traditionally unequal.

Second, what works as an effective dialogic practice for one discipline may not necessarily work for another, but this challenge presents another opportunity for student–staff partnership projects to delve into existing discipline-specific insights (for instance, dialogue in science education) and deploy them in their own contexts. In terms of larger scale curricular, pedagogic and assessment considerations, incorporating dialogic practices would demand extensive pilot research – an opportunity as well as a challenge.

Lastly, a consideration particularly relevant to dialogic interventions is their inherent complexity as an educational tool, understanding the niceties of which demands both student and staff partners to be significantly well-versed in the psychological and linguistic affordances of dialogue. When not considered, dialogue within student–staff partnerships is at risk of being either trivialised or, as Ellen puts it, be perceived in terms of its literal definition.

- In conclusion, the constructivist dialogic approach presents a platform for addressing the barrier of communication as well as providing opportunities for research-based student–staff partnerships. The key recommendation here is its value in promoting equality between the student and staff members by deploying the quintessential tool of communication, which is central to education.

  The necessity of extensive research and critical reflection, both in terms of the very discipline as well as in pedagogically translating it into feasible practice, ensures contributions from both the staff and student members and in terms of opportunities, shows promise as a creative and innovative exercise for both stakeholders.

  For a prospective research-based educator intending to participate in such a student–staff partnership, a starting point would be to reflect upon the extent of their reliance on dialogue in their own practice and in light of their own roles as a teacher, learner and educator. That in itself could lead to many emerging questions and motivations to be pursued further.