

Staff/student partnerships: a cautionary tale

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Introduction

Staff/student partnerships are increasingly being used across a wide variety of subjects in higher education (HE) to enhance the student learning experience through actively engaging students in research, peer learning and problem-based learning (Bovill, 2017; Healey *et al.* 2014). Whilst it is accurate to say that there has been an increase in the academic literature within the field of teaching and learning in the area of staff/student partnerships, much of what has been written has taken a positive perspective (Mercer-Mapstone and Clarke, 2018; O'Sullivan and Prichard, 2019). The contention generally is that these staff/student partnerships should be encouraged, particularly in such areas as feedback and assessment. In 2018, we reported, in this journal, on our work – a staff/student partnership for bringing the One-Minute Paper into the digital age. This current paper provides an update on what happened afterwards. Our previous paper was highly positive about working in partnership, whereas this paper takes a more critical view – academics should also be aware of potential negative outcomes when entering into collaborations with their students. It should be noted that this is a reflective piece from our perspective as teachers and we wish to be as frank as possible about the challenges we experienced and how working in partnership can sometimes go wrong.

Some considerations from literature

Partnership is an elusive concept in all fields of society (e.g. partnerships in public and social policy and partnerships between organisations), with no universally agreed definition. Partnership in an educational setting is no different from this, though the discourse about 'students as partners' seems in recent years to have gained momentum, both in academic practice and in scholarly texts (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2018; Healey *et al.*, 2014; Matthews, 2017), with the fluidity of the concept allowing many different practices and pedagogies to emerge (Mercer-Mapstone *et al.*, 2017). Bovill (2017) noted that it is sometimes impossible and undesirable to achieve full partnership. Such meaningful relationships require a high level of equality and contribution from the partners, which is not always possible in an academic context.

There seems to be agreement, as Healey *et al.* (2014) discuss, that partnership is a process of (student) engagement and is not concerned with the outcome, whilst some authors distinguish between student engagement and partnership (Mercer-Mapstone *et al.*, 2017). Matthews (2017) further proposed that, in the spirit of true partnership, we should accept partnership as a process with uncertain outcomes. However, when Mercer-Mapstone *et al.* (*op.cit.*) conducted a systematic review of literature focused on students as partners, they found that the majority of papers reported positive outcomes for students and many papers also reported positive outcomes for staff. Contrary to this, very few papers reported any negative outcomes for either staff or students, with Mercer-Mapstone *et al.* (*op.cit.*) encouraging more reporting of negative outcomes and the challenges experienced in partnerships. Moreover, papers seem to be more student-centric in terms of what outcomes are reported of the partnerships, whereas authorship of any publications as a result of

partnerships is more staff-centric. We'd have loved to co-author a paper with our student partners, but, as explained later in this article, with the relationship breaking down, this was not possible.

Background: the student projects

During the academic year 2017/2018, we (three Management lecturers) worked with two groups of third-year Computing Science students (ten students in total) at the University of Glasgow, in an effort to develop software that combines a digital classroom response system with the traditional paper-based One Minute Paper (OMP) assessment and feedback tool.

As teachers heavily invested in developing pedagogy, we had been researching ways to enhance the learning experience of students, with a focus on large-class teaching where there is a very diverse international student body. In these classes, it is often difficult to tell what our students are absorbing and whether they understand the key concepts we are trying to teach them. Often, there is limited opportunity for one-to-one conversations with students, and students – possibly because of their cultures – are not likely to raise any concerns they may have in class when surrounded by their peers. To tackle this issue, we started experimenting with the OMP, which is a tried and tested method of gathering feedback from students. However, we found that, particularly in large-class teaching, it takes a long time to analyse the feedback, making timely action in response somewhat difficult. We quickly decided that the creation of a digital OMP (DOMP), would enable us to overcome this. The DOMP would not only give students a voice and increase participation in class, but it would provide valuable feedback to us as teachers, allowing us to respond to student feedback and questions in real time and, where necessary, to adapt our content or style of teaching to deepen students' understanding of any particular topic.

We were all experienced in working on business consultancy projects with external clients and students and had been made aware that the School of Computing Science was looking for partners to act as clients for its Software Team Project course. As we were not, however, experienced in being the clients ourselves, there was a learning curve involved. The project brief that we delivered to our student project teams was to develop a tool that could be used to improve teaching through feedback addressed in real time, allowing issues to be dealt with immediately and more efficiently, with instant benefit to present students, as opposed to end-of-course feedback which benefits only future students.

We did not actively go out of our way to work with students on this project – rather, an opportunity presented itself and we felt we could not let it pass. However, with hindsight, perhaps we should have recognised at the outset the central role that students should play in shaping their own HE (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2018; Healey *et al.* 2014). The students were keen to work on our project, as it would involve improving a piece of software that they were expected to use in their learning (i.e. the original software was frequently used by their teachers in classrooms) and often there were practical software problems which they found annoying. When we understood this, we fully embraced working with the students as partners – since they had a vested interest in the outcome, they should have a say in how that outcome was achieved. One could, however, argue that it was not a full partnership, on account of our being their clients.

The final stage of the partnership after the student projects

The honeymoon phase

At the end of the student projects in 2017/2018, each group with which we had worked handed us a prototype software solution. We tested each solution and selected one of these for further development, asking two willing students from one of the two project groups to take this forward and work more closely with us over the summer of 2018 to develop the final software package. Our teaching team secured – from our head of school – funding for the project, allowing us to incentivise the students to continue it with us.

We envisaged that the work would take place over the summer semester, with a view to testing the software in semester 1 of the new academic year (2018/2019) before launching to the wider school in semester 2. The teams had finished their software prototypes at the end of March and we then secured funding and a commitment to continue from the two students in April. We encouraged the students to consider whether they could (with our support and guidance) complete this work as a start-up and we found additional funding opportunities they could apply for in April; as a result, they set up a business. To kick off the next stage of the project, the students attended with us in late April a prestigious learning and teaching conference, at which they helped demonstrate the prototype to an audience of over fifty academics and received feedback on its functionality. By early May, they had successfully pitched for a place on an internal enterprise programme, securing additional funding which would have lasted throughout the summer and would have involved getting training in how to run a business. With their new business set up, the total funding available to the students to take the work forward between June and August was £6,500.

It is worth noting at this point that both students already had plans for the summer, with employment elsewhere. We were aware of this, but, after the students had discussed their commitments with us and given their assurances, we were working under the assumption that they could easily combine their full-time responsibilities with this essentially part-time endeavour – it would be up to them to decide how they spent their time on the project (provided the software was completed for the beginning of the coming academic year). The students were, after all, working from a prototype that they had designed themselves, so the work to bring it to completion was not estimated to be particularly onerous. The August deadline was therefore intended to allow us to start using the software when teaching commenced in September.

The downfall

Owing to the support and resources that were in place, we did not anticipate any problems with this final stage of the partnership project. Ironically, as one of the lecturers on the team researches risk in partnerships, it could be argued that risks should have been anticipated. However, we assumed that the opportunities we had helped the students seek out and secure, with not insignificant financial reward, would be ample incentive for the students and that there should be no reason for their failure to complete the project. It later became clear that this was not the case and that our student partners had failed to deliver on their part of the project.

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It was the perfect storm for our teaching team. The students never received any funding. They were asked to complete a scope of work document and, upon our all agreeing on this, we would release the funding in three blocks over the summer. The first draft of the scope of work was not completed to the standard we expected. Believing that this was driven by their inexperience, we gave them a more formal template to use, which they could also use for their business development. The meeting at which this was discussed took place at the end of May and there then followed a period of what can only be described as 'radio silence' from the students. By mid-June, we were becoming increasingly concerned and, as we were due to demonstrate the BETA DOMP at a conference later that week, we asked the students to send the latest version of the software. There was no response to this request and, at the conference, we had to improvise and use an older version of the DOMP. The two members of our team who were conducting the workshop started discussing the 'what ifs': "What if they no longer want to do this? It's strange we haven't heard anything from them in almost a month." Eventually, after numerous emails and text messages, we heard back from the students, but it was not the outcome we had hoped for: one of them was no longer interested in being part of the project. It became evident that they had also disagreed with each other about how to proceed and about how to take forward their newly set up business venture. Consequently, our project seemed to have stumbled at the final hurdle.

Reflections on the partnership

In reflecting on where we went wrong, the following issues stand out the most:

- We took it for granted that students' motivations and their recognition of opportunities were the same as ours. With our years of experience, we can identify when something beneficial is within our grasp and we might therefore have gone out of our way to nurture this understanding in them.
- We did not fully consider the pressure the students might have felt when combining full-time work with this part-time project.
- We assumed that they were highly committed to the project. This had seemed to be the case, since, without any coercion on our part, they had gone ahead and set up a business (we had mentioned the idea a few times and then one day they just told us they had done it).
- We partnered with the students on account of their willingness and their potential (in terms of coding/designing) to complete the software, but we did not consider other relevant characteristics or capabilities – such as maturity – and were thus expecting too much of students inexperienced in the 'real world'.
- We treated the students as equal colleagues, capable of taking charge of the project, and so set no ground rules – we left it to the students to decide how they would work this out, since they were the experts in programming and since, at that point, the project had become something run as part of their new business. Perhaps we should have had a tighter rein on the project management aspects, including setting expectations for communication. Instead of ad-hoc meetings and correspondence via email or text messages, we should have set a more professional precedent from the outset via more formal communication. However, this would then have meant that the partnership was not a full partnership (Bovill, 2017) as the students would have been put in an unequal position, with a power bias on our side, as teachers rather than

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colleagues (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2018). On the flip side of this, with expertise comes power (Matthews, 2017) – in that sense, the students had power in abundance.

- We had no kind of back-up plan in place (i.e. if one or both of the students wanted out, how would we continue the project?). Essentially, we put all our trust behind these students and expected success.

From a financial point of view, one wonders with hindsight whether (though this was never a consideration at the time) we put too much emphasis on possible monetary rewards – carrot, rather than stick; or, in other words, that we, by controlling the financial resources, automatically assumed that the students had limited power – from our perspective, they were surely, as students, in constrained financial circumstances and would therefore respond to the carrot. What we learned the hard way – and what partnership research tells us (Huxham and Vangen, 2005) – is that all partners have the power of exit, meaning that any partner has the power to block the progress of a partnership, whether intentionally or not.

As a teaching team, we were disappointed in the partnership and with the effect that the students' withdrawal had on our overall project, especially in that the project was delayed until we could find new partners to work with. We had worked with the students throughout the previous academic year and, while maintaining professional boundaries, had helped them with their assessed work well beyond our role as client. We felt that we had a good working relationship with them and had invested not only our time but our professional reputations by recommending them for funding and the enterprise programme. On reflection, our expectations were set too high. From a partnership perspective, we may also have been focused too heavily on the outcome, rather than the process (Healey *et al.* 2014); we certainly entered into the partnership with neither an acceptance that it would be conflict-ridden (Huxham and Vangen, 2005) nor a doubt that a positive outcome could be achieved (Matthews, 2017).

Concluding remarks

Though it stalled, our project has continued. Following our experience with those students, we took stock and considered how best to progress the software development. We recognise that not every experience would be like the one we had and that often partnerships are very successful and deliver strong results, as extant literature tells us (Mercer-Mapstone and Clarke, 2018; Mercer-Mapstone *et al.*, 2017; O'Sullivan and Prichard, 2019). We would have been happy to start another relationship with perhaps a more experienced student (e.g. a PhD student), drawing from our experience and implementing tighter controls and management. However, we have instead ended up working with a staff member (the original software developer). To be frank, even this present partnership process has not been without its challenges, many of which have been of a similar nature to those we found in working with students as partners. We are currently in the process of user-testing the software – with teaching staff from United Kingdom business schools – as part of our scholarship project, funded by the Chartered Association of Business Schools. However, the software, when completed, will be of benefit not just to business school lecturers, but also to multi-disciplinary teachers across HE institutions.

We do not wish to discourage anyone from engaging in partnerships. As our first paper showed, our initial experience was very positive. However, we rather naïvely entered into the

second phase of our project wearing rose-tinted glasses, assuming that an equivalent success would follow and not taking any precautions in case of partnership breakdown. For instance, we completely ignored the 'voluntary' element of the second phase and what impact this might have on a student's behaviour, in contrast to the influence of the 'compulsory' element of the first phase, when students were completing something for assignment purposes. This paper should therefore be viewed as a cautionary tale of how things can go wrong and we urge anyone considering working in partnership (whether with students or others) to take necessary precautions and not put all their eggs in one basket, as we did.

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