CASE STUDY

Developing a Collaborative Book Project on Higher Education Pedagogy: The Institutional, Organizational, and Community Identity Dimensions of Student-Staff Partnerships

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ABSTRACT

This case study presents an ambitious student-staff partnership project at University College London (UCL) to publish a collaborative book on higher education pedagogy. Over two-and-a-half years, a total of 86 students and staff contributed to the project, which sought to provide educators with a new type of scholarly material under the unifying theme of connecting research and teaching. Multiple layers of student-staff partnership were interwoven throughout the project; this case study contextualizes these layers against three dimensions: institutional, organizational, and community identity. Central to the project was our distinctive approach to engaging with Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) and their crucial role in bringing the three dimensions together. As such, the project represents a model of enhanced student-staff partnership that has the capacity to empower students and break down educational silos to form new, multi-specialty learning communities.

KEYWORDS

pedagogical innovation, research-based education, consortium, graduate teaching assistants, interdisciplinarity

Books on higher education pedagogy abound (e.g., Harland, 2012; Fry, Ketteridge, & Marshall, 2014; Hunt & Chalmers, 2013; Weller, 2016), but the student voice is markedly absent within this field. And yet, students are increasingly influencing pedagogy: within the discourse of Students as Partners, their contribution through engagement with the

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is recognized as a distinct category of partnership activity (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014). Typically, this has been through one-off scholarly projects, such as the co-authorship of journal articles (e.g., Ntem & Cook-Sather, 2018; Brost, Lauture, Smith, & Kersten, 2018), or the co-creation of curricula or learning resources within their disciplines (e.g., Bovill, Cook-Sather, & Felten, 2011; Carey, 2013).

Given the many common challenges that exist across higher education and given that students are recognized as experts in the student experience (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014), there is a strong case for students to work collaboratively and to exert a collective influence by writing scholarly materials from the student perspective about learning and teaching beyond their classrooms, departments, disciplines, and institutions to inspire pedagogical innovation in others. Our "R=T" (Research=Teaching) book project at University College London (UCL) was designed to push the frontiers of pedagogical scholarship through partnership with a wide and diverse group of students. We set ourselves the challenge of addressing the following questions: "Can students, like professional educationalists, shape higher education pedagogy? Can they put forward their ideas about the method and practice of teaching in the form of scholarly writing for a wide audience?" (Tong, Standen, & Sotiriou, 2018, p. 3).

This case study offers an analysis of the design and implementation of this project, which culminated in the publication of *Shaping Higher Education with Students: Ways to Connect Research and Teaching* in March 2018 (Tong et al., 2018).[1] We aimed to create a collaborative volume, broad in scope, that discussed higher education from a range of student-staff partnership perspectives. The book is a collection of critical reflection essays, editorial commentaries, and contextual materials that explore connections between research and teaching. It provides educators with ideas on how to embed research-based education in different disciplines, contexts, and academic communities. UCL's strategic vision is the closer alignment of research and education (UCL, n.d.). Scholarly work over the last couple of years has demonstrated how students at UCL are experiencing this research-based approach to teaching (Fung, 2017; Carnell & Fung, 2017; Davies & Pachler, 2018). Our book was an opportunity for UCL students not only to give their views on being students in this research-rich environment, but also for them to propose innovative ways for academics to connect their own teaching and research roles.

A group of Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) at UCL played a central role in the project. They brought their unique position as students-researchers-teachers occupying—possibly more than any other group—the meeting place between the research and teaching environments. From this liminal space (Compton & Tran, 2017), we recognized that the GTAs were able to challenge educational silos—both between disciplines and between research and education. For us, it was both a moral and pedagogical imperative to offer GTAs the opportunity to move beyond their typical "bounded responsibilities" (Park & Ramos, 2002, p. 52) and play a more active part in the development and implementation of educational enhancement and change (Winstone & Moore, 2017).

The student voice has become increasingly embedded in institutional ways of working, and opportunities are widely provided to listen to students in higher education. However, the "listening and being responsive" rationale has been recognized as taking precedence over an emphasis on student engagement as central to creating learning communities (Little, Locke, Scesa, & Williams, 2009, p.13). Engaging students in authentic

co-creation with staff is a way to challenge the current neoliberal trend in higher education, which positions students as consumers whose voices are heard for the sake of student satisfaction.

It has been argued that collaboration between staff and students could become more mainstream (Bovill, Cook-Sather, Felten, Millard, & Moore-Cherry, 2016). Drawing on their own experience and existing research, Bovill et al. (2016) identified four roles that students take on as partners with staff: consultant, co-researcher, pedagogical co-designer, and representative. They position these roles against Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation, a model of citizen participation in community planning that has been used widely in a variety of disciplines and was first used in relation to higher education by Bovill & Bulley (2011).

The project took a highly collaborative approach with multiple layers of student-staff partnership seeking to address institutional priorities that are also in line with current trends in the wider higher education sector. We here present an analysis of student-staff partnership in the project through institutional, organizational, and community-identity dimensions. These dimensions emerged as we reflected on the project; they represent its drivers, the processes by which we carried out the project, and also what we can now identify as some of the key impacts the project had on those involved.

THE INSTITUTIONAL DIMENSION: CREATING INNOVATIVE SYNERGIES BETWEEN INSTITUTION-WIDE INITIATIVES

In recent years, UCL has renewed its approach to education and the student experience (Fung, 2017). Its ambitious 20-year strategy commits the university to becoming a world-leader in the integration of research and education, which is underpinned by an inspirational student experience (UCL, n.d.). In the shorter term, two institution-wide initiatives have been developed to help work towards that goal. The first is UCL Connected Curriculum, a framework for curriculum design which places a connected, research-based education at the core of student learning (Fung, 2017). The second is UCL ChangeMakers, which recognizes the institution as a community of scholars, all at different stages in their understanding of scholarship, research, and the application of knowledge, and which aims to support students and staff to work in partnership to enhance learning (Marie, 2018).

Our book project provided a significant contribution to these two institution-wide initiatives. It aimed to enhance Connected Curriculum and ChangeMakers simultaneously and expand their scope in synergistic ways. The Connected Curriculum framework (Fung, 2017), with its underpinning practice of learning through research and enquiry, was the starting point for our student authors to interrogate research-based education and bring their perspectives to bear upon it. ChangeMakers provided us with the framework for partnership working, including both practical support through training and development opportunities for our student partners, and a wider conceptual ethos of collaboration, innovation, trust, equality, and mutual gain.

In practice, this meant our student authors worked in partnership with UCL and non-UCL academics as well as their peers from other departments and faculties. The project pushed the established frontiers of student-staff partnership in ChangeMakers (and other similar institutional student-staff partnership initiatives) through the scale of collaboration and its resulting sphere of influence. By publishing their scholarly work, our student partners not only disseminated their perspectives on higher education, but also actively

contributed to shaping it beyond their local contexts. Agathe, one of this article's co-authors, comments:

> My involvement in the book project meant putting my experience as a GTA into perspective and sharing it with more experienced members of staff and professors for the very first time. This was all the more novel—and even bold—for me as I come from an educational and academic background where the student voice is not necessarily sought nor valued to craft the higher education agenda.

THE ORGANIZATIONAL DIMENSION: EMBEDDING MULTIPLE LAYERS OF STUDENT-STAFF PARTNERSHIPS IN A CONSORTIUM SETTING

A consortium approach is commonly used to organize complex, large-scale research efforts (Braun, 2003; Lepori, 2011; Wardenaar, de Jong, & Hessels, 2014). Here we analyse the organizational dimension of our collaborative project with its complex interlinked student-staff partnerships as a consortium, which establishes and strengthens relationships among the coordinated activities in a network with the aim of improving their common effectiveness (Hessels & Deuten, 2013; Wardenaar et al., 2014). Eighty-six contributors were involved in our project, all providing original contributions. The contributors can be broken down into five groups:

- Student authors and editors: 26 students from across UCL (i.e., undergraduate, postgraduate taught students, and GTAs);
- Partner professors: Five UCL and five non-UCL research professors with distinguished track records (e.g., national or institutional education prize winners);
- Staff-student teams: Eight groups of staff and students from across UCL who had previously worked on research-based education projects;
- Student-staff partnership experts: One UCL and three non-UCL leading academics in student-staff partnerships; and a
- Project team: Three UCL academics who coordinated the project and edited the book.

The consortium approach allowed us to group the book project into different stages of work over its two-and-half-year duration. First, 15 student authors hosted discussion events at UCL in partnership with their partner professors. The events looked at research-based education through a variety of lenses and approaches, including novel technologies, peer-assisted learning, interdisciplinarity, and the value of making mistakes to the learning process. The events were based on the staff partner's area of expertise but were hosted and facilitated by the student partners. The students took the themes of these events as a starting point for development into their book chapters; their chapters took the form of either reports on focus group findings or reflective essays. The students received feedback from their partner professors and the project team along the way as a way of supporting their development as scholars in pedagogy. A pertinent example of collaboration and interaction between the team was the student authors then peer-reviewing each other's work. Not only did this improve the chapters, but it allowed students to experience the academic peer-review process. Scaffolded peer-to-peer mentoring (e.g., Grant-Vallone & Ensher, 2000), in which the students not only gave each other feedback, but also supported one another's burgeoning understanding of research-based education and shared ideas and interpretations, was thus fully embedded in our consortium. The approach also meant that

all the students gained a more holistic understanding of the book's content and development.

As a second step, 11 new students worked as editors responsible for developing together an editorial framework on research-based education through student-staff partnership. Each student editor then drew on their contrasting disciplinary backgrounds and the collaborative framework to write a commentary on one of the critical reflection chapters. The result was a set of essays and commentaries written by students from diverse disciplinary backgrounds and levels of study. This stage was important in highlighting the key contributions of each student's chapter through the lens of another student partner with a different perspective. It also allowed the book's ideas to be more readily applicable to different contexts and institutions.

In the final stage of the book project, international scholars of student-staff partnership and the project team wrote contextual materials. A further eight student-staff teams showcased real examples of student-staff partnerships at UCL, jointly authoring case studies of practice for the book. Finally, the project team and chief student editor (and co-author of this paper) developed the signposting chapters and epilogue.

Student-staff partnership was the cornerstone of the book project, allowing for the creation of collaborative scholarship from a consortium approach, as Agathe highlights:

> The project allowed me to liberate my thought from the conventional hierarchy within higher education, where students and professors belong to two separate groups, and created a fresh basis for creative inter- and even transdisciplinary discussions inspired by peers, both students or professors.

THE COMMUNITY-IDENTITY DIMENSION: ENABLING STUDENT-STAFF PARTNERSHIPS IN A COMPLEX COLLABORATIVE PROJECT

Throughout the project, different aspects of student-staff partnership were experienced. We began the project with a shared purpose, but it evolved through ongoing discussions between the project team and student partners about the scope and direction of the project. Through collaborative work, students were inducted into the academic environment and invited to join a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Collaboration across levels of study and across disciplinary divides encouraged exposure to different perspectives and approaches in other departments and faculties, but also allowed students and staff to represent their own discipline(s) within the consortium–highlighting the idea that communities of practice do not just exist within formal disciplinary boundaries (Morton, 2012). Through both the initial discussion events and the resulting book materials, the whole project modelled common student-staff partnership values which were fundamental to the success of the project: trust, respect, reciprocity, responsibility, and openness (Bovill et al., 2016 and references therein).

In a bold and novel approach, students and staff switched roles throughout the project. Students hosted events, carried out focus groups, and authored and edited chapters, while staff often took a backseat, which challenged power dynamics that might be typical in student-staff collaboration. Instead of the staff member being considered the expert, students at varying levels were the ones writing the majority of the book chapters, taking ideas from partner academics in new and often surprising directions. Our approach therefore clearly demonstrates a high degree of citizen power in Arnstein's (1964) ladder of participation. As one partner professor wrote in her preface to her partner GTA's chapter:

> Coming from a research-intensive and non-reflective tradition of "see one, do one, teach one," it is a thought-provoking pleasure to read and ponder Jawiria's [the partner GTA] reflections on the opportunities and challenges of incorporating research into teaching to better prepare students in Higher Education for jobs in all walks of life. I also find it very humbling but also comforting that pedagogic techniques, which I thought I had developed carefully and creatively over 30-plus years of interacting with students around research-intensive learning, are part of Jawiria's established "toolkit" as an early-career teacher and researcher! (Tong et al., 2018, p. 224).

This challenge to traditional power dynamics is central to student-staff partnerships. Although it can be daunting for both partners, it can also lead to creative solutions, more confident students, and better learning outcomes (Cook-Sather, 2014). Engaging students in the project from the beginning meant that student input was incorporated at all phases.

Sharing power with students was not just accomplished in individual projects but through the very writing of the book—something unique, yet congruent with the principles of student-staff partnership that were being explored and developed. This approach can be empowering for students and staff alike, repositioning students as knowledge producers rather than mere knowledge consumers, thus fundamentally challenging and restructuring how staff and students work and learn together in higher education.

The consortium style of our project meant that each contributor had something unique to bring to both the book and the functioning of the group itself. Everyone played an active role in shaping the project and thus contributed to a more authentic partnership experience and to the development of a sense of belonging (Thomas, 2012). The consortium approach used in our book project is in line with developing what Morton (2012) identifies as "higher education settings as multiple, overlapping, more or less formal communities (of practice) that students and instructors are simultaneously involved in" (p. 101). Comments from Lauren, one of our co-authors, highlight how the student-centred and collaborative aspects helped her develop a sense of belonging to the academic community:

> Working on the project made me feel more confident as a researcher and writer, but also showed me how I could bring my interests into a project and connect it with my research. Working on the book with colleagues from various departments and disciplines made me feel not only that I was part of a scholarly community, but that I was capable of contributing to that community–in terms of influencing pedagogy and practice as well as being an ambassador for student-staff partnership.

CONCLUSIONS

The institutional dimension represented an important context for our book project, allowing us to bring two strategically significant UCL initiatives together. The organizational dimension played a crucial part in coordinating and embedding multiple layers of student-staff partnerships. However, it was the community-identity dimension that went beyond the contextual and technical aspects of our collaborative project to enable all who took part to make sense of the different forms of partnership and advance research-teaching synergies collaboratively.

Arguably, this was most evident through the impact GTAs exerted on the project and how the project impacted upon them. This group was integral to the project, contributing at

all stages and to all its constituent parts. Commonly cited as lacking in autonomy or shouldering a heavy burden (Park & Ramos, 2002; Muzaka, 2009), the GTAs were instead granted a privileged position in our project: they were active partners for change as staff, students, researchers, and educators all at once. One of our co-authors, Joe, writes:

> As a GTA, I have found partnership to be the most effective method of improving the teaching experience in higher education. Without it, I didn't have the authority, confidence, or experience to articulate my ideas about teaching and pedagogy. Working in partnership with staff provides those three things. It was the perfect preparation for a future academic career and undoubtedly helped me secure my first academic position.

Of course, while the benefits to our group of GTAs may be more tangible and their role in the project more substantive, we hoped for all of our student partners to benefit from our collaborative approach to advancing the research-teaching nexus. An undergraduate student from our team wrote in her original application to the project: "There is an understanding that even researchers and senior academics are still learning, and thus bringing together research and teaching continues in this strong tradition of community."

At the project outset we sought to explore the extent to which students could shape higher education pedagogies beyond their local contexts through student-staff partnership. We wanted students to be recognized as experts in the integration of research and teaching. These were ambitious objectives, and the project was operationally complex and not without challenges. For the three project leads (who are also co-authors of this paper), this meant maintaining the students' motivation, supporting them as they negotiated their individual competing priorities, being willing to hand over the power to students, and, crucially, accepting that things might fail. For the students, this meant overcoming some, at times, firmly-held perceptions about conventional academic hierarchies and having the confidence to speak up and challenge the status quo of their discipline and their very understanding of the function of higher education.

Our co-created open-access book has already had a global reach (as reflected by download statistics),[2] and its sphere of influence continues to grow through further projects with partner institutions worldwide. Beyond our desire for educators and researchers to read the book and implement the ideas co-created by students and staff, our hope for the project is that it will inspire others to work in partnership with students to co-construct knowledge, break down silos, and challenge power dynamics—forging new academic communities to shape higher education pedagogy together.

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NOTES
1. The book is free to download at https://www.uclpress.co.uk/products/95121.

2. 26,846 downloads from 165 countries and territories as of August 2019 (https://www.uclpress.co.uk/pages/statistics).

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

Lauren Clark *is a PhD researcher and Teaching Fellow at UCL Institute of Education, where she studies critical pedagogy in Higher Education. She is interested in making connections between student-staff partnership (SSP) and critical pedagogy and exploring how SSP and research-based education might challenge hierarchical and transmission-based pedagogies. She was a student partner in the R=T project, working as a contributing author and lead student editor.*

Agathe Ribéreau-Gayon *holds a PhD from UCL and is currently a UCL Honorary Research Fellow. Her research and teaching concern biological anthropology, bioarchaeology, and forensic science. She advocates interdisciplinary research and teaching, and is an Associate Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Agathe was a student partner on the R=T project, participating as one of the 11 initial student authors during her time as PhD researcher and Teaching Assistant.*

Mina Sotiriou *is a Senior Teaching Fellow at UCL. Her area of specialism is in the pedagogies of e-learning, and she works closely with colleagues to develop blended and online short courses and programmes. Mina co-led the R=T initiative and she is currently leading another student-staff partnership project in UCL focusing on the educational use of blogs*.

Alex Standen *is Associate Director in UCL's Arena Centre for Research-Based Education, where she has oversight of all of the Centre's activity around the professional development of early career academic staff and research supervisors. She was staff partner on the R=T project and co-edited the book.*

Joe Thorogood *is an Assistant Lecturer in geography at Coventry University. He was a PhD researcher and Teaching Assistant at UCL and worked on the R=T project and many other student-staff partnership projects with the Arena Centre. He is currently working on a book proposal on postgraduate pedagogy and writes about teaching and student engagement on his blog (http://slowstudents.com).*

Vincent Tong *is a Principal Teaching Fellow at UCL and is serving as the founding Secretary of the American Geophysical Union's Education Section. He champions synergies between research and education through student-staff partnerships, including through his leadership roles in the R=T initiative*.

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