Student as Partners in Course Design

What does it mean to work with "students as partners" in course design?

Within higher education, there is growing recognition of the importance of students' active engagement in their learning. In parallel, educators are increasingly inviting students to contribute to teaching and learning through a myriad of roles, including as partners. This is in part, due to recognition of learners' expertise of what it means to be a learner and recognition of the potential to apply this knowledge to enhance teaching and learning.

The term "partnership" as it relates to teaching and learning in higher education has gained increasing recognition, with scholars both outside of Canada (U.S., U.K.) and within Canada exploring the theory and practice of various aspects of partnership, including involving students as partners (e.g., Bovill, Cook-Sather, & Felten, 2011; Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014; Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014, 2016; Healey & Jenkins, 2009) and students as co-researchers (e.g., Weller, Domarkaite, Lam, & Metta, 2013; Werder & Otis, 2009; Werder, Thibou, & Kaufer, 2012).

Partnership is a *process of student engagement,* involving faculty, students, and staff learning and working together with the goal of enhancing learning and teaching. Partnership is marked by high levels of active student participation and contribution, and is a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014). Partnership is also "a collaborative, reciprocal *process* through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision-making, implementation, investigation, or analysis" (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, pp. 6-7).

Given the emphasis on process, relationships, and reciprocal learning, partnership represents a sophisticated and effective approach to student engagement, as it positions students as collaborators in the academic mission of the University and offers the potential for a more authentic engagement with the nature of learning. Pedagogical partnerships allow the possibility for genuinely transformative learning experiences for all partners. Through partnership, all partners benefit from the process of learning and working together.

To conceptualize the overlapping areas within which partnership to enhance teaching and learning may occur, Healey et al. (2014) developed a conceptual model (see Fig 1, below).

FOUR AREAS OF TEACHING & LEARNING PARTNERSHIP:

- curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy
- the scholarship of teaching and learning
- subject-based research and inquiry
- learning, teaching, and assessment

Partnership learning communities are at the centre of the model to highlight the importance of the processes of partnership. The concept of partnership learning communities draws on existing models of community, including learning communities and communities of practice, which focus on social learning (Healey et al., 2015). Principally, developing partnership learning communities among faculty and students "strengthens and sustains engagement through partnership" (Healey et al., 2015, p. 8).
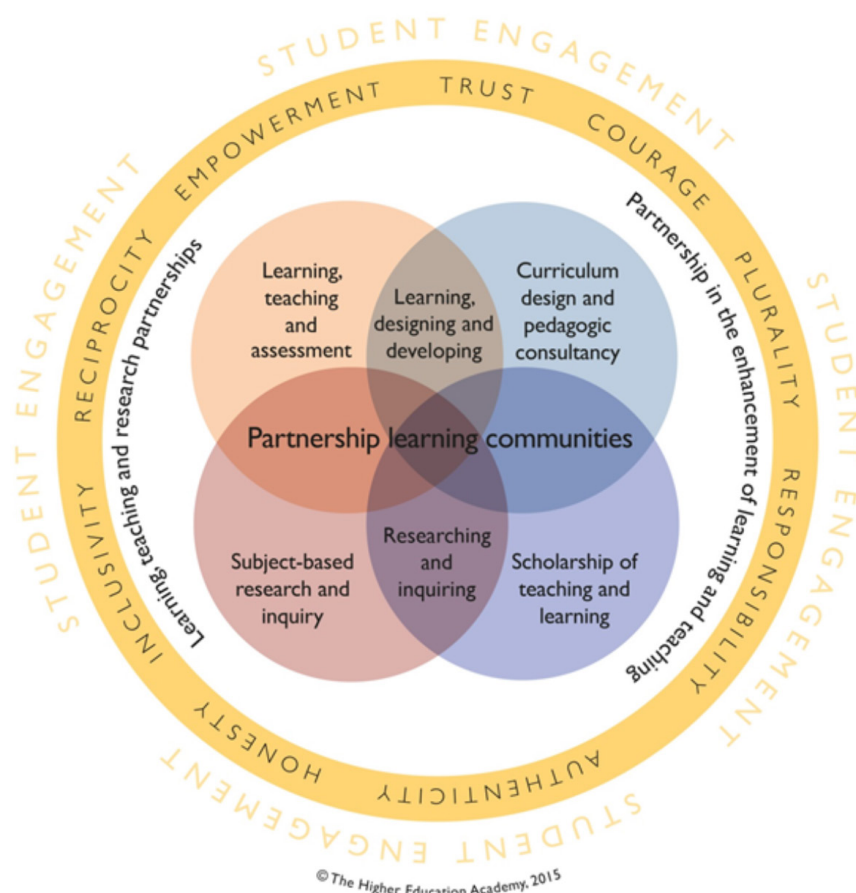

Figure 1:
Students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education,
Source: HEA (2015) adapted from Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2014, p. 25)

According to Cook-Sather et al. (2019), teaching and learning partnerships within the area of curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy can involve faculty, staff, and undergraduate student partners, working together long-term (typically semester or year-long) to:

- explore or research the student experience in a course or program of study to determine where changes might improve the student experience or student learning;

- analyze and revise pedagogical approaches, and/or design or redesign a course or parts of a course;

- decide together on the approach they will take and what dimensions of the course or teaching practices on which they will focus; and

- identify needs to be addressed (e.g., how to engage students in answering questions, how to make courses more welcoming to a diversity of students) and develop actions or strategies to address those needs (pp. 3-5).

In these partnerships, faculty are the disciplinary experts, staff bring expertise in course and program design, and students bring expertise on the student experience.

When faculty, staff, and student partners work together in long-term relationships, student partners may:

- convene for regular cohort meetings with teaching centre staff and other student partners to brainstorm, exchange, and troubleshoot ideas to inform their partnership work, as well as to receive teaching and learning mentorship;

- conduct regular visits to their faculty partners' classrooms and take detailed observation notes focussed on pedagogical issues their faculty partners have identified;

- meet regularly with faculty partners to discuss the observations and what might be revised in relation to classroom practice, assignments, and assessment; and

- research pedagogical approaches in the faculty partners' disciplines to inform current or future teaching, and work with their faculty partners to apply all of what they have explored during their partnerships to future pedagogical practice (Cook-Sather et al., 2019, p. 10).

Why students as partners?

There have been ongoing conversations amongst individuals within UBC regarding the student-as-partners movement, demonstrating interest in bringing this work closer to UBC practices. This work has strategic alignment with two core areas of the Strategic Plan: Transformative Learning, with potential alignment with multiple priorities including Education Renewal, Practical Learning, Interdisciplinary Education, and Student Experience; and People and Places: Inclusive Excellence.

Benefits for instructors to engage in a pedagogical partnership with students include:

- Working collaboratively with students.

- Receiving formative feedback and consultation on their teaching practices from a learner perspective.

- Applying first-hand student experience and perspective to:
  - transform or refresh their thinking about their practices of teaching;
  - develop creative and innovative ways to address pedagogical challenges or opportunities.

- Receiving support for redesigning a course, course activity, assessment strategy, etc.

- Developing a greater understanding and appreciation of students as learners.
  - Opportunities for instructors to be learners themselves (i.e., to learn from students and staff).

Benefits for students to engage within a pedagogical partnership with faculty include:

- Developing a greater understanding of how teaching and learning works:
  - Participation in the design of teaching approaches and courses can lead to greater sense of empowerment and confidence when it comes to learning (Bell, 2016).
  - Opportunity to demonstrate expertise: According to Cook-Sather et al. (2019) participation in pedagogical partnership has particularly powerful outcomes in relation to students' academic engagement in their own classes and their sense of their evolution as active agents in their own development (p.22).

- Development of scholarly identity and understanding of teaching as a scholarly product. Through participation and collaboration in the mechanisms of research-informed teaching and learning, students develop applied knowledge of how universities work and what it means to be a scholar.

- Development of professional competencies (design, communication, facilitation, teaching, research, etc.)

- Development of meaningful relationships with faculty and staff (Kehler, Smith, & Verwoord, 2017).

- Increased self-awareness (Bell, 2016).

- Financial remuneration.

Benefits for staff involved in a student partnership program include:

- Personal development including new skills and new ways of thinking (Curran, 2017).

- Relationship building (i.e., build meaningful relationships with students and faculty at course-level projects) (Curran, 2017).

- Enhanced understanding of students' learning experiences.

- Development of greater understanding and appreciation of students as learners.

Benefits for UBC, and/or Faculties and departments include:

- Fostering students' sense of belonging to their program and the university.

- Creation of new student/faculty engagement in the teaching and learning mission of the institution.
  - Engagement in the process, not just the outcomes, of learning.

- Demonstration of leadership through innovation in the teaching and learning space.

- Addressing cultural and institutional assumptions about students and their learning through deeper opportunities to engage with diverse students' experiences.

What are some models of students as partners programs at other institutions?

A decentralized approach, an instructor/student partnership in solo

Carleton: Students as Partners Program carleton.ca/iis/students-as-partners-program-sapp/

- Faculty, instructors, and staff members are encouraged to identify an undergraduate student partner with whom they feel they can collaborate (e.g., students who have successfully completed a course that they've taught, or they've worked with before, or a student who has expressed interest in collaborating with them).

- Teaching and Learning Services at Carleton will fund the student partner for up to 130 hours of work.

- Instructor and student have a direct relationship; staff in the teaching centre are not involved.

- It is anticipated that the work will be completed within one academic term.

An award-based model

McMaster: Student Partners Program mi.mcmaster.ca/student-partners-program/

- Students and instructors apply to the program independently.

- Instructors create project proposals, and students accepted into the program rank the projects on which they would like to be a partner.

- Can be one or more terms; funds awarded and distributed up to a maximum of $2,000 per project (to fund approximately 50 student hours).

- Project funds are transferred to the project lead and are held in departmental accounts.

- The teaching centre provides specific support for funded projects such as for research skills and project meetings. It also hosts an annual student as partners symposium.

A centralized approach with mentoring

University of Virginia: Co-create UVA cte.virginia.edu/programs-grants/student-faculty-partnership

- Students are hired by the teaching centre and work as educational consultants, who give faculty feedback on their syllabi at the Course Design Institute and assist faculty in improving teaching and learning through in-class observations or a teaching analysis poll.

- Instructors already collaborating with students in course or curricula development can contact the teaching centre for inclusion in the program.

Bryn Mawr: SaLT Program tli-resources.digital.brynmawr.edu/programs-and-opportunities/salt-program/

- Student consultants work up to seven hours per week in the paid role of pedagogical partner for a specific faculty member.

- Using a detailed mentoring/cohort model, students attend and participate in weekly, semi-structured, one-hour discussions focussed on what is happening in the faculty partner's classrooms and how to support faculty exploration, affirmation, and revision of pedagogical practices.

- Students visit the faculty partner's class once each week and take detailed observation notes focussed on pedagogical issues identified by the faculty partner; students meet weekly with the faculty partner and offer mid-semester and end-of-semester feedback.

- The student partnership program is often used as an activity for new faculty members.

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Appendix

Examples of Existing Student-Engaged Teaching and Learning Activities at UBC

Student Directed Seminars:

- The CTLT has been collaborating in the Student Directed Seminar Initiative led by Workplace Learning and the Centre for Student Involvement & Careers. The Student Directed Seminars program provides upper-year undergraduate students (in third year or later) the opportunity to propose, coordinate, and lead their own three-credit seminar class with a small group of peers on a topic not currently offered at UBC Vancouver.

Chapman Learning Commons Web Team:

- The Learning Commons website is an evolving collection of student-curated learning resources to support academic success and wellness. Based out of the Chapman Learning Commons in the Irving K. Barber Learning Centre, the Learning Commons website is a collaboration between UBC Library, the Centre for Teaching, Learning & Technology, and the Centre for Student Involvement & Careers. Each term, the Chapman Learning Commons hires two students for the web team. These students work with the Chapman Learning Commons Coordinator and the Learning Services and Community Engagement Librarian as well as two staff members at the CTLT. The students provide direction for the website and social media engagement; however, the coordinators suggest priorities, and depending on the year, determine the key projects.

Digital Tattoo Project:

- The Digital Tattoo has from its inception been a partnership among staff, librarians, faculty and students. From the outset of the project, the advisory committee had as a guiding principle: "students are in the best position to identify relevant content themes." By centering students as 'leaders' and partners, the Digital Tattoo Project seeks to ensure that the content created around digital identity and privacy remain connected to the student experience and relevant to student needs. The Digital Tattoo also seeks to provide a space to challenge the concept of students as consumers of education, and instead envision them as co-creators of knowledge.

SoTL Seed Program:

- The program brings together faculty interested in engaging with the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) and graduate students (SoTL specialists) with expertise in all aspects of carrying out education research plans — from the design of a study, to ethics applications, data collection and analysis. Students are hired and mentored by ISoTL staff and are assigned to faculty-initiated projects based on matching skill sets related to projects' design and methods. The program thrives on partnership and collaboration, where faculty contribute the disciplinary and pedagogical expertise, and SoTL specialists offer capacity and knowledge of behavioural and education research.

Teaching and Learning Innovation/Enhancement projects:

- Faculty, students and staff at UBC Vancouver have opportunities to seek funding from several sources, such as the TLEF and the OER Fund. Many of these projects create opportunities for SaP relationships, with projects that are led by or strongly influenced by the creative engagement of student partners of the project team.

    Two recent examples:
    - Developing reusable technology workshops to enhance digital literacy (UBC Library – Research Commons). Students play a role as content developers to create workshops for graduate students requiring skills in GIS tools, digital humanities tools. The CTLT provides training to students in workshop facilitation and design principles.
    - Just Food: Building Equity Competencies with Food Systems Pedagogy: a student-initiated project to enhance equity competencies of instructors, teaching assistants, and students using food systems as a platform for education and civic engagement.