CASE STUDY

The Importance of a Whole-of-Department Framework in Learning Partnerships

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ABSTRACT

This historical case study of the Yilgarn Project explores a community-engaged, whole-of-department framework that involved students as partners in research and publications. It shows how existing flexible curriculum and assessment processes enabled student engagement with research. The purpose of this case study is to share practice and to explore partnership styles. It locates partnership approaches in the intellectual traditions from which they have emerged and explores the relative importance of the process of partnership as well as the product, which is described in terms of the skills that students learned. The Yilgarn Project is analysed in the context of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) Framework (2014) with special reference to the core values that inform partnerships. This gives rise to discussion of the nature of partnership and the relative importance of using empowering processes to enhance student learning outcomes.

KEYWORDS

community-engaged; research-led curriculum; empowerment; social science; partnership values

The British Higher Education Academy's (HEA) Framework (Healey et al. 2014) defines learning partnerships in terms of students' active engagement, collaboration, and opportunities for choice. Ryan and Tilbury (2013) hail this approach as "learner empowerment" (p. 5) because it challenges the power relationships inherent in hierarchical and didactic teaching and learning settings. Through partnerships, students become "change agents, producers, and co-creators of their own learning" (Bovill, Cook-Sather, Felten, Millard, & Moore-Cherry, 2016, p. 196). According to Bovill et al. (2016) students' partnership roles may be classified as consultant, representative, pedagogical co-designer, and co-researcher. This case study focuses on the final role, seeking to tease-out the different ways in which students can engage as partners in research because, following Moore-Cherry, Healey, Nicholson, and Andrews (2016) "our working definition of

partnership is not tightly constrained, rather it seeks to indicate boundaries to the concept" (p. 85).

The HEA Framework for partnerships is process-driven and based on core values of successful partnerships. These are:

- authenticity (staff and students are invested in the project),
- inclusiveness (the removal of barriers to participation),
- reciprocity (everyone benefits),
- empowerment,
- trust,
- challenge,
- community-building, and
- shared responsibility (all parties share collective responsibility for the aims of the partnership and individual responsibility for their own contributions).

Partnership approaches build on established pedagogical traditions. For example, constructivist pedagogies hold that "learners are not passive, uniform, empty vessels into which we can pour second-hand knowledge. Effective learning occurs when the learner is actively involved in the primary construction of knowledge" (Stewart, 2012, p. 10). Collaborative learning communities emerged as effective vehicles for constructivist pedagogies. Wenger (1998), for example, crystallised the concept of Communities of Practice which require "the participation of people who are fully engaged in the process of creating, refining, communicating, and using knowledge" (p. 1). These notions of collective and participative learning build on what has long been understood about women's collaborative ways of knowing (Belensky, Clinchy, Goldberger, Tarale, 1986) and Frière's (1971) collective conscientization strategies. In brief, collaborative and active learning is core to pedagogies associated with empowering, transformative adult learning (Knowles, Holton, & Aswansu, 2005).

THE CASE STUDY

The Yilgarn research project was initiated by a request for the development of a shire history by the Council of the rural Yilgarn Shire in Western Australia. It asked the head of the social science department of a metropolitan college to produce a book commemorating the centenary of the discovery of gold in the Yilgarn. The Council planned 10 years ahead. This presented an opportunity to develop a structure to facilitate staff and student research over an extended period. A whole-of-department framework was adopted in which staff of the social science department undertook to write chapters of the book based on their own and undergraduate students' research. In effect, the Yilgarn Shire became a social science laboratory. This approach resulted in a book of greater scope than is customary in local histories. Chapters covered topics such as climate and landscape; geology and mining; soils, flora and fauna; economic development; politics; and Indigenous history. Two chapters provide the focus of discussion for this case study because both are now open source. These are "Miners and Farmers 1915-1950" (Hunt, L.J., 1988a, pp. 197-265) and "Women" (Hunt, L.Y.A., 1988, pp. 351-411). This case study is historical to the extent that student research focused on regional history. Further, given the time needed to produce the book, it refers to work completed in the past. As a consequence, students have now graduated and their voice cannot be included in this account of the project.

The whole-of-department framework provided opportunities for students to engage in authentic multidisciplinary research based on qualitative and quantitative investigation using

primary and secondary sources of evidence. Participating students were enrolled in a six-course minor studies program which was guided by the principles of student choice of assignment topics, continuous assessment, and active learning. In brief, it was already primed as a research-led curriculum which "means that students become producers of knowledge, not just consumers. The strongest curricula form of this is seen in special undergraduate programs for selected students, but such research and inquiry may also be mainstreamed for all or many students" (Jenkins & Healey, 2012, p. 132). So student partnerships in research and writing for the Yilgarn Project were accommodated by the flexible, research-led curriculum without need for further changes.

The whole-of-department framework and 10-year time frame meant that some students studied a number of courses oriented to the Yilgarn, so they completed more than one piece of work for the project using a range of research methods. Within the framework, students designed and developed their own research projects in collaboration with each other and with college staff. Students were engaged in knowledge production and, in some cases, their original work and dissertations were placed in the Western Australian State Library providing an evidence base for future historical work. Similarly, students' interviews with local residents have been digitised and included in the Western Australian State Archives and are credited to students as independent researchers. Student contributions were fully acknowledged in the ensuing book, *Yilgarn: Good Country for Hardy People*' (Hunt, L.J., 1988b).

Research design skills

The Yilgarn Project was informed by active learning pedagogies—students learned by doing. It was a constructivist (Stewart, 2012), authentic (Hunt, 2005), and problem-based approach. Students were confronted with real-world research problems that had to be resolved through effective design of their independent research projects. For example, one student wanted to develop a questionnaire survey about attitudes towards women in paid employment in a region dominated by the traditionally male industries of farming and mining. Her first draft of the survey contained leading questions that risked presuming the answers. Further, the questions did not necessarily reflect the information she was seeking. So, it was suggested that she work backwards; for example, she was asked: "What kind of results tables do you need to have in order to answer your research question?" A few examples were modelled and she gained momentum in formulating her intent. For example, she wanted to know if men and women differ in their responses and if older men and women respond differently to people in younger age groups. When she knew what she was looking for, she developed an appropriate sample of respondents and worked backwards from this sample to formulate survey questions that would give rise to answers that might illuminate attitudes to women's paid employment. Through this process she gained insight into research design, in particular, the importance of aligning the beginning, middle, and end result of the process.

Research methods

Students' research in the Yilgarn Shire formed part of their normal course of study. The project provided a focus for the specified, skills-based learning outcomes for each course and for assignments. Students chose topics for themselves, and these determined the selection of research methods. In broad terms, students learned about questionnaire construction, interviewing skills, and content analysis of documents. Given that some students completed more than one course and more than one assignment about the Yilgarn, there were opportunities for them to engage with a number of research methods.

Information retrieval skills and data interpretation

Students learned information retrieval skills through their original research on secondary sources. The end notes to the "Miners and Farmers" chapter show that, inter alia, students referred to documentation from the Lands and Surveys Department; minutes and rates books of the Yilgarn Road Board; and private records from local farms including cash books, ledgers, and bank books. Students also referred to local newspapers, which revealed surprisingly high levels of education and some literary talent in this remote rural population. They also learned to triangulate findings either by completing multiple assignments using different methodologies or by discussing their results with each other because they were all working within the same whole-of-department framework. The triangulation of research results, from different sources, led to complex analyses in which students came to understand, for example, that what was written and said about women bore little resemblance to what they actually achieved. In short, key learning outcomes included not only information retrieval skills but also critical thinking about the interpretation of evidence.

Discussion about research findings took place in tutorials and during regular week-long fieldwork trips to the Yilgarn. Fieldwork was facilitated by the Shire Council, which offered free use of the local sports centre for accommodation. This facilitated student engagement which has been noted as "both a requirement for and an outcome of partnership" (Bovill et al., 2016, p. 196). Fieldwork also facilitated community engagement and students' immersion in the project. This enhanced learning outcomes because living in the community, even for a short time, contributed to emotionally engaged learning that encouraged awareness of ethical considerations about how to write individual research projects, raising such questions as, "Should we just write the pretty stories, or do we write about local tensions such as racism and sexism?"

Ethics

According to R. L. Healey (2014) ethical thinking is a "particular type of critical thinking" (p. 3). Ethical thinking is considered such an important outcome of a university education that it is almost universally included in lists of expected graduate attributes. Yet in contemporary higher education settings, the progress of even small pieces of undergraduate research can be inhibited by the very process of gaining ethics approval before embarking on data collection. The departmental framework of this project allowed students to proceed quickly under the umbrella of ethics approvals granted to the project whilst learning how to implement ethical considerations such as the need for confidentiality and the importance of protecting the privacy of respondents. This accords with R. L. Healey's (2014) observation that learning about ethics includes "an ability to perceive the ethical implications of a situation" (p. 3). She also notes that many ethical issues are multidisciplinary in nature, which suggests that opportunities to complete multiple assignments in different courses within the minor study program enabled students to explore the ethical implications of research from the perspectives of a number of disciplines including sociology, history, and geography.

Report writing

Undergraduate students wrote their own reports about their research projects. This facilitated the assessment of individual achievement required for normal accreditation purposes. The undergraduate teaching and learning processes associated with writing echoed those normally available to postgraduate students. Individual tutorials and iterative cycles of review, reflection, and improvement resulted in written work of a standard high enough to merit being archived in state and professional libraries. In the writing process, students had to marshal their

material into reports that required them to account for their methodology and describe and analyse results.

ANALYSIS

This case study shows how the whole-of-department design of the Yilgarn Project scaffolded students' learning experiences. They developed high-level skills and learned threshold concepts in social science (Land, 2012) including: research design; research methods, such as questionnaire construction, interviewing skills and content analysis; information retrieval skills; data interpretation; research ethics; and report writing. Students took responsibility for the design, implementation, and reporting of their own research. In some cases, their work has been archived in state libraries, which means it has been shared publicly. Strengths of the project include the provision of multiple opportunities for students to learn about the design, implementation, and reporting of research. Further, the whole-of-department framework created a community of practice that built confidence and facilitated students' individual publications. These outcomes accord with the HEA core principles of partnership approaches.

However, students did not share in writing the chapters for the book. This is a possible point of departure from the HEA core values, which advocate collective responsibility for the aims of the partnership and personal responsibility for individual contributions. This issue gives rise to a number of questions about partnership processes. For example:

1. How should partnership processes be assessed—by their compliance with partnership criteria or in terms of students' learning outcomes—or both?
2. To what extent is it necessary for students to engage in every aspect of a project for the benefits of partnership to be apparent?
3. How important is the extent rather than nature of partnership processes to learning outcomes?

Cook-Sather et al. (2014) suggest that while all participants in a partnership should have the opportunity to contribute equally, this does not necessarily mean that they contribute in the same ways. Creating opportunities to contribute in different ways is a curriculum matter. According to Tinto (2003), learning communities and partnerships "begin with a kind of co-registration or block scheduling that enables students to take courses together, rather than apart" (p. 1). He referred to linked and cluster courses as well as coordinated studies where courses "are typically connected by an organising theme which gives meaning to their linkage. The point of doing so is to engender a coherent interdisciplinary or cross-subject learning that is not easily attainable through . . . unrelated, stand-alone courses" (p. 2). The Yilgarn Project offered this kind of organising theme to the six-course, social science minor in which students were enrolled. It might be considered a jigsaw model of partnership in which each student takes responsibility for researching his or her own piece of the big picture, scaffolded by a whole-of-department framework and a curriculum already geared to undergraduate research by active learning pedagogies and provision for student choice in assignments.

The HEA's core values for a students-as-partners approach are process-driven. This means that the manner in which students are involved is important. Put simply, it is not just what you do but the way that you do it that is important. Student empowerment is the goal. It is about equalising the power relationships inherent in university learning and teaching to give students space to learn. Labonté's (1990a) analysis of empowerment indicates the need to avoid prescriptive approaches because "I empower you" is a contradiction in terms—the speaker remains in control of the process. So, at what point does intervention in student-learning partnerships become a measure of control? As Northedge (2005) pointed out, student-centred

approaches do not obviate the act of teaching intervention. The point is to facilitate learning partnerships in empowering ways which McWilliam (2005) describes as "meddling in the middle":

> Rather than teachers delivering an information product to be consumed by the student . . . the teacher and student [are] mutually involved. . . . In colloquial terms, this would frame the teacher as neither sage on the stage nor guide on the side but *meddler in the middle*. The teacher is in there doing and failing alongside students. (p. 11)

According to Labonté (1990a), empowerment refers to a process in which participants gain or assume power. This can be done at three levels all of which echo the HEA's core principles of partnership:
1. intrapersonally, as in confidence building and the development of a sense of self-efficacy;
2. interpersonally, which refers to the construction of knowledge based on personal and shared experiences; and
3. within communities, meaning the cultivation of resources and strategies that provide beneficial outcomes for all (Labonté, 1990b).

These levels of empowerment could serve as benchmarks for exploring partnership as a process. For example, learning communities and partnerships can be disempowering for some, as Freeman (1972-73) long ago noted in her powerful analysis of the tyranny of structurelessness. So, do we know what works and what does not in partnerships? What helps students gain a sense of self-efficacy through their participation in learning partnerships? What processes help students to construct knowledge and analyses based on personal and shared experiences, and which aspects of partnership work to enhance students' ethical and critical awareness? Finally, what do we know about partnership processes that are disempowering or counterproductive to positive student learning outcomes?

This case study shared practice by showing how the Yilgarn Project created opportunities for students to construct knowledge that was important to a rural community. They gained confidence that was beneficial beyond the project. Many students taking the minor studies course were mature-aged. They were apprehensive about their abilities to study anything, let alone complete their own research projects. Inspired by their participation in the Yilgarn Project, some went on to postgraduate study and some became active members of professional history associations.

In conclusion, the community-engaged, whole-of-department framework that integrated students' research into normal curriculum processes provided opportunities for students to work as partners in an undergraduate, research-based curriculum that provided multiple opportunities to build their confidence and competence as social researchers. The project gave rise to a book in which students were named as researchers. The book will be open source, connecting the Yilgarn Project to community studies around the world.

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