

OPINION PIECE

Toward the Formation of Genuine Partnership Spaces

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Students as Partners (SaP) represents an entangled nexus of relationships, roles, individuals, groups, expectations and interactions that challenges us with its nuance and complexity. In my own experiences working as a student partner, I have come to see SaP as a practice encompassing numerous collaborative contexts that can provide a relational and transformative pedagogic space. These transformative spaces can allow participants to act outside the role-boundaries that typically confine their teaching and learning activities, and *potentially* create a path to cultural change within universities. However, I am sceptical of the extent to which current SaP policies and practices in higher education align with the aspirational and transformational ideals of SaP.

In this opinion piece I argue for genuine partnerships spaces by outlining two models as pathways for SaP—one that maintains the current hierarchical structure of higher education and misuses the term “Students as Partners,” and another that changes the shape of universities through genuine partnership. My argument arises from my identity as an undergraduate student studying anthropology, my experience as a student partner over the past two years, and a synthesis of my thinking following research projects exploring conceptions of SaP from students and staff in partnership and institutional leaders responsible for implementing the partnership.

Importantly, this opinion piece is as a necessary contribution of the student voice to a discourse community seeking to create space for more student-authored works in the scholarly literature typically reserved for the academic voice (Cliffe et al., 2017).

TOWARD GENUINE PARTNERSHIP SPACES

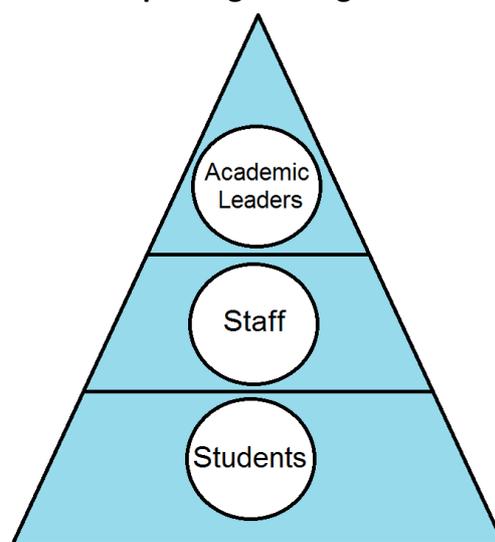
Questions about SaP being “genuine” and “authentic” often arise in conversations with peers about partnerships. In the last issue of this journal Matthews (2017) proposed five principles for genuine SaP practices. I want to expand on her work by exploring the idea of genuine SaP not as a practice, but as a space. I see genuine partnership space as the emergent property of an ongoing process of communication and cooperation between individuals.

Neoliberal pathway diminishes relational forms of partnership

The current organisational paradigm of higher education institutions is characterised by a structural hierarchy, that is organised vertically (see Figure 1), and is broadly motivated by economic imperatives while promoting individualistic competition at each level of the

university. My analysis of interviews with formal institutional leaders, for example, found that their primary frame of reference for conceptualising higher education was economic rationality (Matthews, Dwyer, Russell, & Enright, in press). Within this context 'Students as Partners' was often discussed as a product or strategy to ensure the university remained competitive and positioned students as self-interested consumers with little concern for their role within society. These views, priorities, and markers of success for partnership are heavily influenced by the rhetoric and logics of what has been called the neoliberal approach to higher education (Barnett, 2010). The occurrence of these views among senior leaders aligns with recent scholarship on neoliberal imperatives in universities (Ball, 2003, 2012; Shore, 2008).

Figure 1: The current organisational paradigm of higher education institutions



If we consider the implications of enacting partnership within the current paradigm, then partnership interactions are limited and typically deal only with role-specific contexts (e.g., the student experience and content delivery). The knowledge developed through these projects is valuable to the university and its senior administrators, and the function of SaP practices is the advancement and development of the university as a business.

For staff, the neoliberal process of SaP is used as a performance assessment tool for administrative leaders to critique and compare teaching staff. For students, neoliberal SaP typically prioritises high achieving students as ideal participants. Moreover, where SaP participation is unpaid, or the pay-to-work ratio is unbalanced, it prioritizes students who are financially stable and are able to shoulder the extra workload. This in turn exacerbates the disparities between certain types of individuals and both implicitly and explicitly encourages peer competition among staff and students.

By reinforcing role-based identities among participants and by limiting the scope of participation, the neoliberal pathway encourages linear and non-transformative teaching and learning. By incentivising competition within groups at the lower levels of the institutions' social structure, the neoliberal approach reinforces the hierarchy and power disparities inherent in that structure. The space of higher education does not change, although the language of Students as Partners might be evoked regularly.

Ultimately, this approach to SaP conflicts with the ideals and aspirations necessary for the creation of genuine partnership spaces, and compels us to seek an alternative approach to partnership.

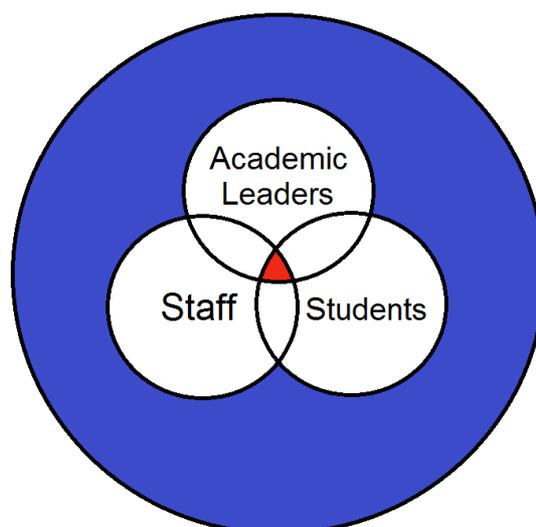
Genuine partnership spaces emerge through dialogue

The second approach to partnership gives primacy to open communication and the relational aspects of pedagogy. This model envisions partnership as a distinct pedagogic space that emerges between, and takes shape through the interactions of, university leaders, staff, and students.

As participants become involved in the process of partnership they are encouraged and often required to act outside of the boundaries that typically define their position in the university hierarchy. As a result, those boundaries become less salient as interactions between partners are focused on collaboration, dialogue, and establishing shared goals. This was a strong theme arising in some of my recent research on participation in SaP (Matthews, Dwyer, Hines, & Turner, 2018) and resonates with my own partnership experiences. Establishing open dialogue is an important stage in the process as it is where the abstract concept of partnership becomes concrete by suspending traditional notions of teacher and student identities and interactions (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017; Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2016; Matthews, 2017), thereby affecting change in the participants' understandings of themselves as co-producers of knowledge.

Through processes of dialogue and negotiation a genuine partnership space emerges (see Figure 2), which resonates with ideas of SaP as a liminal space (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017). This space forms over time according to the shared goals and commitment to the ethos established and maintained by participants through collaboration and dialogue (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014; Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2016; Matthews, 2017). Participation in the partnership space can be contentious, rewarding, nerve wracking, and confidence building at different points in the relationship as partners learn, inquire, and create together according to the means and ends most appropriate to them.

Figure 2: Partnership space emerges between individuals as part of a committed effort to their project and each other



As a long-term model for enacting SaP, the genuine partnership approach offers the potential for both personal and institutional transformation by incentivising intellectual autonomy and fostering trust through dialogue. When participants move out of their partnership space, the boundaries between hierarchical roles become less salient. Over time and with continuous engagement in this form of practice, individuals at all levels of the university will experience a shift in how they relate to other members of their university and their own potential for learning, growth, and development.

Thus, the pathway toward genuine partnership spaces shifts the shape of the university, so where we start is not where we end, as visualised through the evolution from Figure 1 to Figure 2.

CONCLUSION

While theories and models for SaP are emerging in the literature, I see this opinion piece as contributing a student view on what SaP should become and a critique of neoliberal forces influencing the relationships that are fundamental to genuine partnership. I have argued that not all SaP is genuine partnership and that our collective efforts within the SaP community should be focused on a pathway toward authentic formations of partnership spaces.

I offer these opinions to provoke a productive discourse by contributing to the ongoing partnership conversation as a student member of the SaP community. Moreover, as a student I'm occupying spaces created by this journal with the hope of seeing more student-led articles that contribute to the theorizing and critiquing of pedagogic spaces and practices in the scholarly SaP literature.

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NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

Alexander Dwyer is currently an undergraduate student studying anthropology at the University of Queensland in Australia and holds a degree in psychology. He has been a student partner and researcher in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, and with the Institute of Teaching and Learning Innovation. He also works as a social researcher for the Queensland government in the Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships (DATSIP).

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