

OPINION PIECE

Stretching the Cultural-Linguistic Boundaries of “Students as Partners”

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For the past two years, I have been working in partnership with students and staff from diverse disciplinary, cultural, and national backgrounds on the co-development of rich cross-cultural learning experiences in the formal and informal curriculum. Coming to this work from a background in international education, I was initially drawn to the concept of “Students as Partners” (SaP) because I had become increasingly frustrated by the failure of universities to value, include, and learn from students who have diverse cultural experiences and knowledge (Mestenhauser, 2011). I wondered, could the potentially radical new language of “partnership” disrupt the way internationalisation tends to be understood and practiced in universities and open up more generative ways of learning from each other in cross-cultural spaces ?

My initial survey of the SaP literature suggested that it might be an Anglophone phenomenon. With a few notable exceptions, such as Gärdebo and Wiggberg’s (2012) work in Sweden, SaP developed predominantly in the education systems of the United Kingdom, North America, Australia, and New Zealand in response to the particular conditions in those countries. Does this mean that SaP is culturally blind, and/or culturally bounded? Is “SaP” culturally translatable? What sense might those from other (pedagogical) cultures make of the concept, and how might engaging with different cultural perspectives on staff-student partnerships change the way we conceptualise them?

SaP scholars are beginning to engage in a conversation about the culturally constructed nature of partnership, and its implications for building inclusive partnerships. While Kelly Matthews has raised concerns that “SaP may be biased in favour of ‘like students’ partnering with ‘like staff’” (Matthews, 2017, p. 2), some SaP practitioners in Anglophone contexts (for example, Cook-Sather & Agu, 2013; Cook-Sather, 2015; O’Shea, 2018) are engaging with students from minority groups in partnership. Kaur, Awang-Hashim, and Kaur (2018) have highlighted how faculty-staff partnerships in the Malaysian context differ from those in Western contexts. Similarly, writers such as Frison and Melacarne (2017) in Italy and Pounder, Ho, and Groves (2015) in Hong Kong have discussed the interpretation and enactment of partnership values and practices in non-Anglophone contexts.

In a recent editorial in the *International Journal for Students as Partners*, Cook-Sather, Matthews, Ntem, and Leathwick (2018) observed that the word “partner” is interpreted differently in cultural-linguistic contexts; for example, in Germany “partner”

connotes a sexual relationship, in France it is likely to be associated with a business relationship, while in post-colonial societies it can “signal disenfranchisement” (p. 5) by evoking the failed promises made by colonising powers. I hope to contribute to this conversation by highlighting the Anglophone origins of SaP and suggesting how we might imagine and practice more inclusive and enriching partnerships in translingual spaces.

PARTNERSHIP AS A CULTURAL-LINGUISTIC CONSTRUCT

Students as Partners is a complex cultural construct, and not one that lends itself to easy translation. To elaborate, a cultural construct is a set of ideas, which over time shape the shared identity of those in any community. Love and honour are examples of cultural constructs. While there is some shared meaning across cultures regarding such complex ideas, their significance may vary in many details. Different cultures have their own constructs of teaching and learning (Ryan, 2012), as they do of partnership (Cook-Sather et al., 2018). These varying constructs have implications for the way student-staff partnerships will be interpreted and enacted by people from different cultural backgrounds.

I have sought out opportunities to stretch the cultural boundaries of Students as Partners in many different cultural settings in several countries. During workshops and discussions, I have invited participants to draw on their own backgrounds, life experiences, and language(s) and to share the constructs, stories, and values they might associate with Students as Partners (as it is currently understood). Making space for participants to share their cultural knowledge in languages other than the dominant one in use results in a more inclusive and enriched understanding of what partnership can be.

For example, when I invited this discussion in Ireland, participants suggested that the idea of Students as Partners resonates with the concept of *meitheal*, an Irish Gaelic (Gaeilge) word for the traditional co-operative labour system in Ireland whereby community members help each other in turn with all kinds of tasks, such as house building or harvesting. Being able to speak of SaP as a form of *meitheal*—as an “expression of the ancient and universal appliance of cooperation to social need” (Mary Robinson Centre, nd)—immediately energised the room, as participants began to imagine how *meitheal* might be enacted in their own teaching/learning spaces. Similarly, on a couple of occasions, workshop participants from Aotearoa/New Zealand have connected SaP to the Māori concept of *manaakitanga*. Significantly, this is a concept which is already shaping educational practice in that country. As the Secondary School Curriculum Guides (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2011) explain, *manaakitanga* is about “values of integrity, trust, sincerity, and equity. Through *manaakitanga*, the teacher and fellow students recognise and affirm the identity of each student in open and trusting relationships” (para. 1). Again, by inviting participants to bring concepts of deep cultural significance into the pedagogical space they became quickly engaged—in this case, in imagining how they might enact the kind of care-full hospitality associated with *manaakitanga* in the rather inhospitable spaces of higher education.

Meitheal and *manaakitanga* are two constructs, among many, which have emerged when I have invited participants to explore and share the intersections between SaP and their own culturally embedded experiences of collaborative learning. This process of creating translingual spaces is in itself a profound learning experience.

IMAGINING AND CREATING PARTNERSHIPS IN TRANSLINGUAL SPACES

Creating translingual spaces does not require any particular language ability in either teachers or students. What it does require is an openness to co-learning and to valuing and

respecting the cultural-linguistic gifts of others. In my experience, creating translingual spaces for partnership conversations has not only empowered those in cultural minorities, but also benefited the monolingual majority in Anglophone universities. Because different languages give us access to different histories and ways of thinking, translingual spaces provide opportunities for monolingual English speakers to hear words/constructs from unfamiliar languages and appreciate the points of connection and disconnection between their own and other (pedagogical) cultures.

As Coco (Yitong) Bu (2017), a Chinese international student studying in Australia, explained:

Although the term “Students as Partners” is quite new, it seems to me that the ideas that underpin it are much older...When I think back on my education in China, I realise that I was always an active participant...Our teacher gave us opportunities to demonstrate how we solved problems on the board in front of the class rather than simply giving us the solutions herself...In becoming involved in SaP practices in Australia, I have understood that my school maths teacher [in China] was actually...giving students the chance to produce knowledge rather than just consume it.

As I have been working in cross-cultural partnerships, I have been reflecting on what it is that enables these partnerships to work ethically and productively. It is worth stressing the danger of cultural appropriation in such spaces. Cultural constructs, which have deep, even sacred meaning in minority cultures, are still all too often exoticised, fetishised, misunderstood, and misused by those in majority cultures. While I have been mindful of this danger, I believe it can be addressed—and has been addressed—by fostering an attitude of “productive ignorance” (Singh, 2010). Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu (in Bourdieu & Wacqaunt, 1992), Michael Singh (2010) described productive ignorance as an attitude which enables the co-production of new understanding developed in an ethic of reciprocity.

Productive ignorance flourishes where everyone is willing and able to reflect on the value and the limits of their own and others’ cultural capital. When this occurs, ignorance and knowledge are “productively” entwined (Singh, 2010), because ignorance of another’s cultural knowledge is what fuels inquiry (Green, 2018). Although recognising ignorance “productively” can be unsettling, particularly perhaps for those in the cultural majority, I know I have been deeply enriched by the many conversations that have flowed from the collective acknowledgement of ignorance in cross-cultural partnerships.

CONCLUSION

What I have presented here are some reflections based on my experience of working—critically and creatively—in cross-cultural learning-teaching partnerships. I began this work excited by the radical potential of “partnership,” but I also wondered how the concept of SaP might translate across cultures and languages. At times my experience in these partnerships has seemed much like any other cross-cultural encounter, replete with opportunities for misunderstanding as well as for new ways of seeing. In the process I have come to understand how building partnerships in the spirit of productive ignorance can open up possibilities for deep cross-cultural learning. I encourage others to continue stretching the cultural-linguistic boundaries of “Students as Partners” by inviting, valuing, and respecting different cultural-linguistic interpretations of the concept.

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NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

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