

BOOK REVIEW

Shaping higher education with students: Ways to connect research and teaching by Vincent C. H. Tong, Alex Standen, and Mina Sotiriou (Eds.).

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The edited book, *Shaping Higher Education with Students*, provides an excellent authorial example of Student-Staff Partnerships (SSPs). Student editors and student authors make up a good proportion of the writers, many of whom are working with staff writers. In it there are numerous disciplinary and transdisciplinary examples that provide substantial insight into processes of how SSPs may be realised in practice, especially for forging connections between teaching and research. My work has concerned the explicit development of student research skills and the book's position on who does the developing is clear; it is staff and students in partnership.

The stated aim of the book is to position University College London "as a case study for what can be achieved when students and staff work together to disrupt traditional relationships between research and teaching, and to reconceptualise partnership working in a higher education setting" (p. 17). The book provides multiple ways of enabling SSPs, from student involvement in curriculum design to collaborative research, as well as multiple levels of engagement, from individual/small teams of students to the involvement of an extensive number of student co-contributors. Individual chapters deal with a variety of SSP approaches including engaging postgraduate teaching assistants, workplace learning, interdisciplinary studies, and using technology in research-based education. As the book's purpose is to shape higher education through the ongoing influence of students, it shows the potential of SSP to provide an enduring approach that keeps curricula current and fit-for-purpose.

For me, the book raised a number of issues about SSPs and I will focus on four: power relationships, threshold concepts, student inclusion in SSPs, and empirical evidence.

For students to be partners in teaching and research, the writers argue, "power does need to be distributed towards students so that they can make an equal contribution through their expertise in the student experience" (p. 31). The book acknowledges that negotiating power dynamics can be a difficult area for SSPs, which is an ongoing source of scholarly discussion in the *International Journal for Students as Partners*. Reading the book, I observed the tensions inherent in these shifting dynamics, especially tensions that are linked to accountability. If students have increased power to plan or act, but the teaching staff are the ones held accountable for perceived quality, completions, and learning outcomes, this can be problematic. What can be done in SSP to rectify this potential inequality in accountability for partnerships where power is more in the hands of students than traditionally is the case? One potential answer from this book is the rich sense of student engagement, enhanced learning, and potential for a variety of improved learning

outcomes, including performance measures and student satisfaction. The potential of great learning outcomes and engagement can make staff feel less vulnerable and more willing to be accountable for SSP outcomes.

A number of the chapters cite Cook-Sather's (2014) article on pedagogical partnerships as a form of threshold concept for higher education. Because threshold concepts are "conceptually difficult, counter-intuitive or 'alien'" (Meyer & Land, 2003, p. 412), I think it is important to consider how many staff will cross this threshold, especially as they have the pressures of accountability in higher education. This is particularly salient due to the book's drive to help universities realise SSP's potential, where "all members of the university community will have to embrace new ways of thinking about the relationship between learners and teachers in the process of knowledge creation" (Matthews, Cook-Sather, & Healey, 2018, p. 28). While numerous strategies are needed to help university educators span the divide between "getting" SSP and not, this book provides a useful resource towards helping some cross that threshold through its provision of varied examples, especially with its strong student voices.

Related to power and learning or curriculum design, the case studies in this book brought many questions to my mind that were linked to notions of threshold concepts in disciplines. How effectively can students influence programs of study with reference to the complexities of design that accounts for student learning of crucial concepts in discipline-based courses? There are strong examples in the book that tutoring and peer assistance is effectively conducted by those who have recently completed the same course of study or are currently enrolled. It may be, then, that a SSP approach to designing the curriculum or influencing its implementation is effective for student learning of the crucial and tricky threshold concepts in a course. Therefore, future research can expand the case studies in this book by investigating the learning outcomes for all students affected by SSP in a variety of contexts. In other words, empirical evidence of student learning associated with SSP is a critical next step for the SSP scholarly community.

My final focus is on equity and inclusion. The issue of equity has generated much discussion by students (e.g., Bindra et al., 2018) and staff (e.g., O'Shea, 2018). There was a clear commitment in the book to disrupting student-staff power hierarchy or addressing student-staff inequality. From a broader social justice perspective, I wanted to know more about how the SSP case studies presented in the book were working toward addressing student equality.

Dwyer (2017), writing as a then undergraduate student, raised concerns about partnership practices that "prioritise high achieving students as ideal participants" because this "exacerbates the disparities between certain types of individuals and both implicitly and explicitly encourages peer competition among staff and students" (p. 12). It would be great to know more about the students engaged as partners in this book. Is there a benefit from having as partners a mixture of students who have different orientations to learning, such as those who are serialistic learners wanting logical, sequential learning and those who tend to be more holistic learners who prefer less structure and more open-endedness (Pask & Scott, 1972)? Are some orientations more likely to be involved as partners than others? Do students who become partners originate from across the education spectrum in terms of GPA, gender, cultural and language background, and socio-economic background? How can programs ensure that students who do choose to be partners broadly represent all students affected by each initiative rather than merely enforcing their own ideas? Because as Matthews (2017) recently argued, "Without reflecting on diversity and inclusion, a risk is

that students-as-partners may be biased in favour of ‘like students’ partnering with ‘like staff’” (p. 2). Explicit statements on the proportion of student contributors who were first-in-family, their socio-economic distribution as well as academic performance would provide a lot of insight into who the power is shifted towards in the book.

Shaping Higher Education with Students is a great start to addressing the issues raised here through its rich examples of SSP practice from a diverse range of contexts. This book will prove to be particularly helpful and insightful for academics striving to connect research with teaching, staff setting up or facilitating extended SSP projects, and students commencing research projects and other partnerships with staff.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

John Willison has been intrigued for 30 years by how students may effectively engage in research-based learning—first in high schools, then primary schools, and in the past 15 years, in higher education. In collaboration with many academics, he devised the Research Skill Development (RSD) framework in 2004 to inform educators and students across the span from primary to PhD. The RSD, and the more generalised version, the Models of Engaged Learning and Teaching (MELT), were the subject of two Office for Learning and Teaching grants, and two National Teaching Fellowships. Numerous resources are available at www.rsd.edu.au and www.melt.edu.au.

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