

BOOK REVIEW

An active student participation companion by S. Barrineau, A. Engström, and U. Schnaas.

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What first caught my eye about this publication was the title. The focus on “active student participation” will draw in those of us who share an interest in partnership, but the choice of the word “companion” intrigued me, implying something to accompany the reader, to complement other sources and ideas.

Co-authored by an educational developer and two recent graduates, all of whom participated in active student participation (ASP) and partnership projects at Uppsala University in Sweden, the companion shares the learning from their experiences and provides food for thought for those embarking on similar work. The diversity of voices—the authors, student contributors, and semi-fictionalised voices of theorists—help the reader understand and situate the authors’ ideas in national, institutional, and personal contexts.

The authors frame ASP as both a dimension of student engagement and an umbrella term for other ways of working that readers may be familiar with, such as Students as Partners, change agents, consultants and producers, co-creation, and peer-teaching and -learning. There is much for those of us interested in partnership to take away from this document with the caveat that the authors describe a very active form of student engagement, not just staff-student partnership. They also note the slipperiness of the language around these ideas, describing ASP as a “term in flux” (p. 27). The tension between holding terms open for co-development and the desire to have clear definitions resonated with my own experience and reinforces the need to articulate and discuss these terms as we work together. The authors’ model of student engagement (on p.29) is a useful addition to existing frameworks and models, which may be used to inform conversations that unpack these complex concepts.

The tone is conversational with an engaging use of images and stories. The authors also invite and encourage readers to contribute their “voices, ideas and creativity” (p. 4) throughout. It is arranged in three sections: the concept of ASP and how it works at Uppsala, practical tools and guidance, and connections with educational research and theory. In the latter section, I was drawn to the links between the purpose of higher education and ASP. This chimed with my work to develop tools to help people articulate individual philosophy statements for student engagement and partnership. The authors creatively do this using an illustrated “Invented Dialogue” about ASP between key educational thinkers who have

informed their thinking. They invite readers to continue this dialogue imagining what our favourite theorists would add.

The text covers a lot of ground with prompts to help the reader engage with and apply the ideas in their own contexts. I can see this being a useful companion for many audiences (e.g., teaching and professional services staff, educational developers, and students) as they navigate partnership work, with plenty of activities, models, examples, and worksheets that could be adapted to use in individual reflection and workshops. Chapter 5 provides a workbook with questions and space for the reader to note their responses. Especially valuable are sections on how to initially engage students with ASP work and unpacking roles and responsibilities—these are topics that often emerge in conversations about partnership.

What struck me most was that the authors do not shy away from the “unsolved” challenges and tensions that working in this way raises, but instead see these as part of authentically engaging with others. They do not offer simple solutions to these complex issues but provide reflective prompts, ideas from the broader literature, and suggestions and examples from their experiences to help the reader navigate this territory. This is dealt with most clearly in Chapters 6 (practical) and 9 (theoretical). The authors invite us to stay with the trouble (after Donna Haraway) and explore these tensions. I believe working through some of these tensions is what makes partnership such a provocative and creative space with potential for personal and collective transformation. By encouraging us to do stay with the trouble, the authors emphasise the developmental nature of this work, which necessitates space for reflection, missteps, experiments, and ideas that may not lead to concrete outcomes.

The authors close by saying ASP is about acting well and giving “learners the choice of agency” (p. 226). For me, this spoke to a question particularly relevant to partnership: if the choice of agency needs to be “given,” what does that tell us about the nature of higher education? This question acknowledges a current reality: that it can be difficult for learners to act with agency without others creating the space or permitting them to do so. In responding to this, it is essential to recognise the ways students are already exercising agency (including some of the examples within this companion) and to learn from these.

This practical and scholarly text contributes to our understanding of the potential benefits and transformative tensions that ASP offers in an engaging and supportive way. It does not provide a simple roadmap but shares the authors’ experiences and insights. I welcome this thoughtful, creative, and generous companion on my own journeys in partnership and recommend it to other travellers.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

Dr. Abbi Flint is an independent researcher and educational developer with a longstanding research and practice interest in student engagement, student-staff partnership, and creative academic writing. She is a Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.