REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Reflections on building a strong partnership with students in SoTL

Caroline Campbell, School of Languages, Cultures and Societies, University of Leeds, UK.

Leslie Cameron, Department of Psychological Science, Carthage College, USA.

The authors contributed equally to this work.

Contact: c.campbell@leeds.ac.uk and lcameron@carthage.edu

We came together at a writing workshop in June 2019 as part of an International Collaborative Writing Group organised by Leeds Institute for Teaching Excellence (LITE). Given our shared belief in the value of working in partnership with students, our group focused on the broad topic of student-staff inquiry in curriculum evaluation, led by Caroline from University of Leeds.[1] We had both experienced valuable and positive partnerships with students on projects specifically related to the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL). Over the course of our two-day workshop and regular remote meetings in the past year, we have deepened our understanding of the Students-as-Partners (SaP) model and have reflected on our experiences within it.

We have found that working with undergraduates in research is one of the most fulfilling aspects of our academic lives. In addition to bringing a youthful spirit and energy to the research, they bring their unique perspective. This is particularly true in the case of SoTL where our students have provided critical insight based on their lived experience in education. We have experienced the many benefits of SaP in SoTL, which have been outlined elsewhere (e.g., Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017), and we found it to be transformational.

Our experiences come from two different contexts—a large university in the United Kingdom and a small liberal arts college in the United States. While we initially focused on shared practical challenges that we faced, which included limited time, time management, and discussing and obtaining ethical approval in a short period of time, our conversations have revealed the importance of a deliberate consideration of the way in which we build partnerships. The result has been a deepening of our understanding of partnerships, and we have reflected carefully on how we built them.

INTRODUCTIONS

I, Caroline, am an Associate Professor in language teaching and currently hold the role of School Assessment Lead at a Leeds university in the UK. The University of Leeds Partnership [2] provides the context for working in partnership with students in a variety of areas. I have worked with students as partners on two projects. The first was a Leeds Institute for Teaching Excellence-funded research project, "Co-Discovery" (Brown et al., 2018), where I worked with a

colleague and three paid student partners to co-construct and co-deliver an evaluation of the concept of 'broadening' as part of the Leeds Curriculum. The second was a Pedagogical Research in the Arts-funded project where I worked with six paid student partners to investigate how to improve student engagement with assessment. This second partnership project is the focus of this reflection. I wanted to explore the conceptual challenges as well as the linguistic barriers inherent in the marking criteria used in the School (Price et al., 2012; Evans, 2013; Higher Education Academy [HEA], 2016). Based on my previous experience, I knew that developing a student partnership was the optimal approach for this area of investigation. My goal was to design a partnership project, looking specifically at marking criteria, as an effective means of obtaining the student perspective. I hoped the outcomes would inform our practice in the School of Languages, Cultures and Societies. I wanted the students to decide how best to review the marking criteria, and my role was to facilitate this.

I, Leslie, am a cognitive-perceptual psychologist at a liberal arts college in the US with nearly 20 years of experience conducting disciplinary research with students as co-investigators. In the Fall of 2015, I was granted a course teaching release for one 14-week semester so that I could perform a trial of SoTL research with SaP. I was very excited about conducting research with SaP because it seemed to blend perfectly all the components of my work—my teaching, my students' learning, and research with students—importantly, on a topic of relevance and particular interest to them. I recruited five undergraduate student volunteers and a faculty colleague[3] to work on several joint SoTL projects. These projects culminated in a group presentation at a regional psychology teaching conference (Cameron et al., 2016). I conceived of these collaborations as being student-faculty partnerships, although that concept was new to me in 2015 and my understanding of the term has deepened as a result of writing this reflective essay. It was my intention to build a team of students and faculty in my department who would conduct SoTL research and share with the rest of the community what we discovered about the ways we teach and learn and about effective ways to assess teaching and learning.

BUILDING THE PARTNERSHIP

The SaP model is different from the standard research assistant or student mentee model in higher education (e.g., Cook-Sather et al., 2014), and we were fully committed to it. We wanted our students to work at the higher end of the "ladder of student participation" (Bovill & Bulley, 2011), and we strived to give students control of particular aspects of the projects. Although this involved an element of unease at times, as described below, it was essential because we wanted to encourage the students to take responsibility for particular aspects of the research.

We were deeply invested in these projects and had high expectations for both ourselves and our undergraduate partners. We recognized that our success was closely linked to theirs. The type and intensity of the relationship was still novel for us. I, Caroline, found that it took time for students to really believe that they had a high level of involvement. I think this was because working in partnership was new to them, so they needed time to understand their role and to trust me, given that we did not know each other before starting work on the project. Although the role description included the verbs co-construct, co-design, co-deliver, and co-author, it was only through discussion of the project outline in the first meeting that they

realised nothing about the way the project would be conducted was set in stone. I handed responsibility to the students for determining the research questions, designing the interview questions, preparing the consent form, finding participants, conducting the interviews, and analysing the responses, and I acted as a sounding board.

The first meeting was important not just in terms of getting to know each other, but also in establishing the ethos of the partnership, determining the students' roles on the project, and clarifying the level of involvement. Each meeting ended with agreed actions and deadlines, which were recorded in our shared folder on OneDrive. This helped reinforce the sense of partnership—everything was shared and we all had access. I remember arriving late for one of our early meetings and found the students looking at their phones—I had hoped they would be chatting, getting to know each other and sharing ideas. So, I used the opportunity to remind them that they could start the meeting without me by logging into our documents and sharing feedback on progress, gently nudging them towards taking ownership.

In our reflections we have come to believe that central to fostering a strong partnership and empowering the students is addressing the differential in power and expertise between us and our students.

In considering the issue of power, we began by thinking about hierarchy. I, Leslie, worried that I had inadvertently perpetuated the hierarchy because unlike Caroline, who went by her first name, I did not. I, Caroline, asked the students to call me "Caroline"—for me, being on first-name terms established a sense of equality and reinforced the message that we were not in the classroom. Also, my goal was to create an informal atmosphere for the partnership. I brought biscuits as this somehow helped make meetings more informal. I, Leslie, on the other hand, particularly as a woman, felt that I had worked hard to become "Dr. Cameron" and that "Dr." reflects my position in the academy and my expertise. Rather than stripping myself of the title, I tried to lift my students up, reminding them that they had been *selected* based on their previous academic success. Moreover, I referred to projects as "Grace's project", for example, to signal that they were in the driver's seat, although I was there to help steer the projects. I also tried to reinforce the idea that we were "in this together" by making meetings less formal. Like Caroline, I brought snacks and encouraged students to bring coffee. We met in a more neutral setting—a seminar room next to the campus coffee shop as opposed to my office or lab. In the end, we have come to believe that the informal give and take of ideas and the relationships that we developed were at the core of the partnership and did not require the dismantling of a hierarchy.

The differential in expertise meant that tasks were distributed differently between us and our students. So, some tasks (e.g., writing ethics proposals) naturally fell to us. We recognized that this distribution of labour was normal and that a successful partnership does not require that we all do the same work. I, Caroline, particularly liked it when the students volunteered for tasks—it suggested that they felt confident and were prepared to take a risk. They taught me about new software, shortcuts when working online, and alternative means of engaging participants in our research. We both found it rewarding to see the students' confidence grow as they participated in ways that were new to them, and we sensed that they felt empowered. What we both wanted in these partnerships was for the students to work to their own potential, to take ownership, and to be equally committed to the project. We wanted their contributions to complement, not duplicate, ours.

Feedback from our student partners

Although this reflection is focused on our experience and we do not want to speak for the students, we did seek their reflections about the partnership. It was encouraging to note that Caroline's students felt that they had ownership of the project. Their responses identified feeling responsible for the research and having "freedom to choose how to approach [their] research." They commented that "the project evolved as it went along," and one partner stated: "I felt like I was able to shape the way the project was organized." One student observed that "it felt that everyone had an equal amount of influence." Our work led Leslie to partner with her students to reflect on their joint experience. In a reflective essay (Pelnar et al., 2020), I Leslie, and my student partners reported that although being a part of this team was extremely rewarding, the intensity of the relationship and the students' desire to ensure they met my expectations resulted in anxiety and was challenging for them. In some cases, the students thought that partnership meant that I, Leslie, expected them to work at the same level as me. I have recognized that I need to do a better job of reducing their anxiety by communicating my expectations more clearly. Ultimately, we were all pleased with our productive collaboration and felt that our team was comprised of partners, if not peers.

Communication

Although we originally conceived of communication as a practical challenge to overcome, on reflection it seems central to building a partnership, as noted in terms of expectations above. We both found that students had a different set of sensibilities around communicating and collaborating as a group. For example, in terms of email etiquette, students were not in the habit of using the "reply to all" function, which makes it easier to determine availability for meetings. We also tended to expect more prompt replies during standard work hours, and we encouraged them to let us know if they were experiencing any issues. I, Caroline, felt disappointed—and frustrated—when one student stopped responding to emails and attending meetings and did not communicate with any of the team. In the end, I concluded that the person had decided to withdraw. I, Leslie, realized that I often interpreted differences in communication style as a lack of motivation or commitment and sometimes found it to be (perhaps unintentionally) disrespectful. We wondered whether students assume that in a group of a certain size, one person less would have a negligible impact on the project. Perhaps we were over-sensitive and needed to remember that students are not used to communicating in a professional capacity. Upon reflection, we realised that we had not been explicit in our expectations for communication. In future we plan to communicate to our students that we expect prompt replies to emails and that we need to know their intentions (e.g., in regard to continued participation).

Reacting to the student perspective

One of the most valuable aspects of SaP in our SoTL research is that the students provided a perspective and insight into their experience that we otherwise have difficulty accessing. Although we valued the perspective, we experienced different ways in which it challenged us.

There were times when I, Caroline, felt uncomfortable hearing about their experience. For example, the students mentioned getting coursework feedback which was brief and lacked pointers about how to improve. They were surprised that I was surprised to hear this! I assumed that staff used the same feedback sheet which requires comments to explain the grade and identifies aspects to focus on in order to improve. Yet what I was hearing from the students was that this was not their experience on some modules. It was only by having this conversation, by listening and by probing, that I gained an insight into the heart of the issue from the student perspective. I realised that the student and the staff perspective were quite different. It was a rare opportunity to talk openly about it.

Similarly, when drafting the interview questions for the one-to-one interviews which the students would conduct, while we were broadly in agreement about which questions to use in addressing our research question, the students proposed one which I would not have thought of including: "Do you feel the criteria can be affected by the marker's interpretation?" In probing their suggestion, our discussion revealed a perception that the marking criteria were not applied objectively or consistently. I asked for specifics, and the examples they gave explained their perception. They were adamant that it was an important question, so, in the spirit of partnership, we agreed to include it in the interviews. The result was that the responses to this particular question identified the issue from the student perspective and informed one of our key recommendations. It was a useful reminder that this important insight would have been missed had there been no student input, and I would not have known how much of an issue this was and how much it irked the students.

I, Leslie, felt some resistance within myself about what the students were bringing to the table. Sometimes it was difficult to hear the students' perspective and understanding of their own learning experience, particularly if it came into conflict with my perspective. On reflection, I realize that my own best learning experiences were with mentors who expressed value in my ideas, even when I was naïve and lacked their knowledge and experience. I was particularly impacted by my first mentor—a brilliant scientist who loved ideas and always encouraged me to express mine and challenge his. I called him Dr. M. until his death when I was a postdoctoral fellow. Although I recognized that I was not his peer, I felt that I was a partner in our joint quest for knowledge. Thus, in partnership with my own students, I have had to check my own ego and my skepticism that they understand aspects of their learning that perhaps I do not. I am challenging myself to embrace fully the idea that, like my former mentor, I am a life-long learner (which is what we tell our students we want them to be) and that I can learn from my students' perspectives and that I do want to hear their voices.

CONCLUSION

Our reflections have convinced us that we met our goal of establishing a partnership with students in SoTL projects. Our teams were made up of equal contributors, and we have refined our understanding of partnership—while "team" may not always indicate partnership, in our contexts they became synonymous. Aside from the practical challenges, which are inevitable, our experience has confirmed the importance of taking time to build the partnership, particularly when working on projects where students have a high level of autonomy. Taking time to get to know each other and continuing to nurture the relationship helped to build trust and helped the students feel empowered. We have found that this process

starts afresh with every new partnership and that there is no easy shortcut. However, it seems to us to be at the heart of our successful partnerships, and this may explain why we are still in touch with the students after they have graduated—the intense nature of that involvement and commitment appears to form a lasting relationship.

NOTES

1. Our group had four members, which included two other faculty colleagues (Maria José Bezanilla, Facultad de Psicología y Educación, Universidad de Deusto, Spain; and Christopher Love, School of Environment and Science, Griffith University, Australia). They participated in our conversations and provided feedback on our ideas and writing. We thank Chris and Maria for their invaluable contributions.
2. See https://students.leeds.ac.uk/#The-Leeds-Partnership.
3. We use the terms faculty and staff somewhat interchangeably, recognizing the language differences between the US and the UK. Both terms are meant to refer to those who pursue teaching and scholarship/research at institutions of higher learning.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

Caroline Campbell *is Associate Professor in the School of Languages, Culture and Societies at the University of Leeds, UK.*

Leslie Cameron *is Professor of Psychological Science at Carthage College, USA.*

REFERENCES

Bovill, C., & Bulley, C. J. (2011). A model of active student participation in curriculum design: Exploring desirability and possibility. In C. Rust (Ed.), *Improving student learning. Global theories and local practices: Institutional, disciplinary and cultural variations (*pp. 176–188). The Oxford Centre for Staff and Educational Development.

Brown, A., Campbell, C., Irnazarow, R., Llewellyn, K., & Pandya, C. (2018). *Co-discovery – a staff/student collaborative evaluation of broadening within the undergraduate student journey: the case for language learning.* Leeds Institute for Teaching Excellence. https://tinyurl.com/LITE-Co-Discovery

Cameron, E. L., Zerban, C., Engle, P., Mackey, A., Reyes, G., Sehgal, K., & von Borstel, M. (2016, February 26). *Student-faculty partnership in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL)* [Conference presentation]. Annual Meeting of the Midwest Institute for Students and Teachers of Psychology, College of Du Page, Glen Ellyn, IL, United States.

Cook-Sather, A., Bovill, C., & Felten, P. (2014). *Engaging students as partners in learning and teaching: A guide for faculty.* John Wiley & Sons.

Evans, C. (2013). Making sense of assessment feedback in higher education. *Review of Educational Research, 83*(1), 70–120. https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654312474350

Higher Education Academy. (2016). *Transforming assessment in higher education*. https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/transforming-assessment-in-he.pdf

Mercer-Mapstone, L., Dvorakova, S. L., Matthews, K., Abbot, S., Cheng, B., Felten, P., Knorr, K., Marquis, E., Shammas, R., & Swaim, K. (2017). A systematic literature review of students as partners in higher education. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, *1*(1). https://doi.org/10.15173/ijsap.v1i1.3119

Pelnar, H., Sehgal, K, Reyes, G., & Cameron, E. L. (2020). Partners, not peers: Defining boundaries and expectations in student partnerships. *International Journal for Students As Partners*, *4*(2), 138–144. https://doi.org/10.15173/ijsap.v4i2.4289

Price, M., Rust, C., O'Donovan, B., & Handley, K. (2012). *Assessment literacy: The foundation for improving student learning*. The Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development.