

## REFLECTIVE ESSAY

**Partnership status: It's complicated. Reflections on the "undiscussables" in a student-staff partnership.**

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As members of a student-staff partnership project team, we worked together over a six-month period to design and organise the first Business, Economics and Law Faculty "CreateAthon" event at the University of Queensland, Australia. The CreateAthon was a one-day, large scale design thinking workshop which brought together 100 students, staff and industry members to co-design, through a series of group learning activities, a new employability capstone course for the Faculty. Our six-person student-staff partnership project team consisted of two staff partners and four student partners, and our team's role was to plan, organise and execute the event. Following the CreateAthon, four of the original six team members (two staff partners and two student partners) decided to get together to discuss writing a reflective piece about our shared experience. When the four of us met after the event, we could all confidently agree that the event was successful. However, we also realised that significant tensions existed within the partnership.

These tensions were only revealed openly when we met, four months later, to co-write this reflective piece. This also happened to be after both student partners had graduated. Initially, we planned to write about establishing boundaries in partnered work, but as we dug deeper, we realised that we gravitated towards this angle because we shared a collective need to make sense of the lingering frustrations we experienced during the partnership. While we all felt these frustrations in individual ways, we agreed that none of us felt able to openly discuss them until after the project had ended. This was despite the fact that we communicated regularly, and that we thought we communicated well, throughout the project. We decided to term these tensions the "undiscussables" of our partnership.

Through this reflective process, we have learnt that partnership and project success differ because they are both living artefacts that evolve and emerge as the work progresses. Our intention in this reflective essay is to unpack why we feel as though our project succeeded while our partnership struggled. We consider more deeply the things that seemed undiscussable at the time, that is, what we felt we had permission to say (or not say) and why, and the potential impact of our hierarchical student or staff roles on trust and communication in the partnership. Through the process of discussing, writing, and rewriting these reflections,

our thinking about partnership has evolved, and we have become more aware and empathetic towards the individual experience of partnered work. We share these reflections and learnings in the hope of contributing to broader scholarly conversations about engaging in student-staff partnerships.

#### CLARISSA DHARMASETA (STUDENT PARTNER)

What I had initially thought was an event logistics project turned out to be a catalyst for something much bigger. At first, I struggled to see how the outcome of this partnership could be more than just a great event, but trusting Angie's vision and process pushed me to challenge my perspective. I became excited about the wider impact this project could have and felt like I was part of something that mattered.

While I felt all voices were heard in the initial visioning process, when it came to implementation, it became clear that responsibilities were not equally shared. I often felt frustrated and undervalued because some student partners were given more leeway than others. I asked myself, but didn't say aloud—why am I being burdened with more work when I've already completed my set tasks, and why aren't there repercussions for partners who haven't?

I also felt that there was a lack of transparency and trust between staff and student partners. On one occasion, I created a comprehensive communication plan for an external staff team to review. While I received positive feedback, the copy that went live was completely different to the work I'd spent hours creating, with no explanation as to why. I was disappointed that I wasn't given the chance to accept any feedback, but I also felt too hurt and embarrassed to address this.

Truthfully, I didn't think my raw, honest feedback would be welcomed in the group. There was always a very positive, uplifting aura in the way Angie led the team, and I never wanted to dampen the mood by bringing up an uncomfortable situation. Instead, I would rely on Aimee to vent my lingering frustrations to. While we only met at the start of the project, I felt comfortable and safe to share my true feelings with her due to the informal and "equal" nature of our student relationship.

The staff partners admitted to shielding us from problems to avoid overwhelming us, which perhaps explains some of this lack of transparency. For example, Jessica acknowledged that sometimes it was easier to "do it yourself." This is likely the mindset that the communications staff had, too. While I understand this logic, there is an inherent assumption that students need to be protected from difficult roadblocks or conversations. This further reinforces the dichotomy between the two roles of student and staff partners, making it difficult to form a truly equal partnership.

I think the staff partners could have been more vulnerable and transparent about the extra work they were taking on and the shielding they were doing. It would have created a better balance in workload if all partners understood that their lack of work was creating more for others. This project has taught me that vulnerability, transparency, and honest communication are key to successful working relationships.

For me, there is no such thing as a truly equal student-staff partner project—and that's okay. However, it is better to acknowledge this early rather than allow frustrations to

accumulate due to the inequality. Even in professional work settings, there is likely to be a team member that does not meet expectations. The important question is: alongside the discussable, how do we navigate the undiscussables? I think the answer starts in being self-aware and willing to be honest and, equally, in having an openness to accept feedback, even when it's hard.

#### AIMEE GRIFFIN (STUDENT PARTNER)

The first thing I thought when Angie told us that our partnership involved creating a new and large event for key university stakeholders was, "I've got this." So, when it came to sorting out roles and responsibilities, I volunteered myself to be the student partner team leader. As the assigned team leader and a confident manager, I was excited by the impact this project could have and my role in its design.

I think the breakdown of trust that Angie describes below happened slowly and was caused largely by uncertainty about how to respond to a changing dynamic within the partnership framework. As team leader, I felt responsible for ensuring that all four of the student partners' tasks were completed. On one occasion, Angie came to me and asked me to follow up with a student partner to ensure her work was completed on time. Despite checking in with her and receiving reassurances, the task was not completed on time, causing delay and adding complexity to the project's progress. I did not want to address this issue directly with the staff partners because I felt it would betray the trust of my fellow student partner. This was a frustrating experience for me, and I felt embarrassed that I was not able to deliver the outcome when trusted to do so. During the partnership, I felt I could not discuss these issues openly because doing so felt like I was betraying my fellow student partners. If I vented my concerns or frustrations, I worried I would be seen as criticising a student partner, potentially risking the partnership to breakdown.

The consequences of incidents like this really affected the dynamic of our partnership. In the end, I felt like I was not trusted to do things my way. I remember thinking, "I know how to do this, why won't anyone let me!" This was difficult to navigate because I was confident of my abilities and eager to share my perspective and ideas. Angie has since explained the uncertainty she had in managing incidents like this. Now, I can understand why the staff partners did not always give me or the other student partners too much responsibility; however, during the project it made me feel overlooked. I wonder: should I have been more willing to share with the staff partners? Should I have volunteered to take on additional responsibility?

This experience taught me the value of trusting your partners to deliver on their promises and following through when trusted. I think Angie is correct that the partnership would have been different if the workload was more openly communicated and students were trusted to handle some of the heavy workload such as implementing feedback. These differences would have benefited our partnership by re-affirming the trust that had broken down.

I have learned that partnership evolves like the project as the work progresses. If there is such a thing as equal partnership in this context, I imagine it is very hard to achieve. There should be room in partnership to address the undiscussables, especially if there is uncertainty regarding accountability or external pressure. When things do not go according to plan,

partners should be presented with the opportunity to learn from their experiences and adapt. This could involve implementing a mechanism where partners openly review the undiscussable aspects of partnership distinct from project deliverables. For example, at the outset, partners could decide to talk about partnership expectations and experiences in a separate forum. In future partnerships, I think it is critical that all partners are mindful of the partnership dynamic as it changes over the course of the project, so that students and staff maximise their partnership experience.

#### ANGIE KNAGGS (STAFF PARTNER)

I have worked with student partners before and found these experiences thoroughly enjoyable and beneficial to my own practice. I assumed that working in partnership with students would be similar to previous experiences. I was provided with a list of student partner applications for the project, and I approached the process of selecting student partners in much the same way I approach staffing of other non-partnership teams—based on skills, attitudes, and competency matching. Through the retrospective and reflective lens I am now applying, I realise I had already established a set of “staff management” assumptions and practices for the project before meeting the student partners and discussing what our partnership might look like.

At the university’s compulsory student-staff partnership project orientation session, the facilitator asked us to work on a co-developed project plan using a provided template. This was a standard business project template which outlined project goals and task allocation. Business processes such as these are standard operating procedures in university practice, and I had already completed a similar template to secure funding for the project. The effect of introducing a compulsory co-developed project plan at this stage triggered my “team project leader” auto-pilot mode. I assumed the lead for the project, thereby subtly reinforcing the traditional university hierarchy of staff “in charge,” which I believe created a structural context that made open dialogue more difficult. Initiating our partnership through these university processes and documentation was not the best way to start, and it is clear to me now that a strong tension was evident, even from the partnership induction workshop, between the success of the project and the success of the partnership.

After our kick-off meeting, we started working on the project, and, from my perspective, we worked well together during the first few weeks. We openly discussed how we hoped to share the project load and manage our work-life balance. However, our post-project reflective conversations revealed that tensions and frustrations began to show as we progressed through the partnership, something I had felt myself but had been unaware others were experiencing. Retrospectively, I can see that what we had initially agreed on was our working relationship—not the nature of the partnership itself. Partnership and work had conflated in my mind. For me, there was a two-speed partnership. One side was an honest attempt at equal partnership where I tried to really see and hear the student partners and celebrate what they brought to the project. The other side was far less authentic, where I felt guilty and uncertain about how to manage partners who were not engaging and leaving additional work and responsibilities to others. While it felt undiscussable at the time, it is clear now through our shared reflections that both Clarissa and Aimee felt this tension and, furthermore, felt disempowered by my

management of it. I believe much of this unspoken tension could have been resolved if I had felt able to raise the situation, but I felt constrained by my staff identity and its associated responsibilities.

My approach to the project was premised on the belief that Students-as-Partners approaches to co-creating and co-designing projects are expressed in a reciprocal, relational process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute in equal but unique ways. I knew I wanted to forge meaningful partnership relationships, but it took time to make sense of what this looked like. Living partnerships are unique relationships, and the next time I work with students as partners, I will open up an honest conversation about what partnership means to each member of the team, and I will include myself in this to reimagine my role as a partner, not a staff member.

#### JESSICA LEONARD (STAFF PARTNER)

The CreateAthon project was my first official student-staff partner project and I embraced it with excitement and enthusiasm. Despite this optimism, the challenges that eventuated took me by surprise.

During the project, I felt there were many moments of equal partnership where each team member had opportunities to share their thoughts. I was consistently impressed by the wonderfully creative ideas, resourcefulness, and sheer enthusiasm of the student partners. I thought back to my own time as a student, and I don't remember being half as committed, innovative, or creative as them. From my perspective, it was this sense of commitment and purpose that bonded the team, with our shared passion enabling us to all work towards the same goal of delivering a successful event.

While the CreateAthon event was successful, it later became clear that there were tensions within the partnership. One of the main issues arising from our post-event reflective discussions was that student partners felt they had not been trusted, empowered, or enabled enough to do as much work as they wanted. Looking back, I can see how I inadvertently contributed to this. I felt that the student partners were more than capable, so how did I let this happen?

The answer lies in my own preconceived ideas going into the partnership. While I was excited and enthusiastic to work with student partners, I was carrying other feelings which were not so readily acknowledged: caution, reservation, uncertainty. I wasn't sure how this partnership was going to work. As a teacher and student advisor, I was used to being the one in charge, the one with the answers. This was a different dynamic and required a shift in thinking, which was more difficult than I expected. For me, the most impactful way this played out was when it came to the actual doing of things. Knowing that it was often easier and more efficient to get something done as a staff member, I reverted to this more traditional role when faced with time and resource pressures. Why rely on a student partner to do a small task, when I could do it just as easily myself? Did it really matter?

What I have since realised is that, collectively, these small tasks do add up to something very important (if not to all student partners, then certainly to some). Our student partners wanted more responsibility, the chance to show what they were truly capable of, and the opportunity to step fully into the project. They did not require shielding from responsibilities or

having me make what I thought were good decisions on their behalf. At the time, I felt it was my duty as a staff member to take on more responsibility, and in an attempt to remain professional, I felt unable to be honest about this with the student partners—my undiscussable. It was only in the follow up discussions, after the student partners had graduated and the associations of the student/staff roles had faded, that I felt able to share this reflection and heard how Aimee had experienced it on the other side.

What I have learned from this reflective process and will take into the next student-staff partner project is the realisation that I need to let go of preconceived ideas, be more comfortable with uncertainty and trust others with what it is they are asking for.

## CONCLUSION

It is apparent from our reflections that many of our feelings were echoed and frustrations were shared within our partnership team, although we did not realise or address it at the time. Perhaps unsurprisingly, our reflections denote that we all found it difficult to articulate and navigate the tensions during our time working together. Many of the issues that we experienced individually indicated a lack of honesty and trust throughout the partnership. In future partnerships, we hope to trust each other more with the tasks that we are given and those that we allocate and to speak up about the pressures and challenges we feel within the partnership and the project.

In this case, our project was very successful, even though there were issues with the partnership. If we had put more emphasis on the partnership rather than the output, what would the project have looked like? We will never know. Considering the shared commitment towards the project, we can guess that it would not have failed, but that it simply would have looked like a different type of success. Perhaps this would have involved more trust and more honest communication. Despite the issues we have identified, we are grateful for the experience that we shared during our partnership, and especially the lessons we learned about the discussable and the undiscussables in partnered work. We all found the process of writing this reflection valuable for our own personal and professional development. We hope that by sharing, others can learn from our experience and are encouraged to take the time to reflect on and share the undiscussables from their own partnerships.

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