CASE STUDY

Students as Partners: A critical-digital partnership model for redesigning the language curriculum

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ABSTRACT

The global COVID-19 pandemic has caused considerable and drastic changes to teaching and learning, forcing many teachers to adopt an online pedagogical approach. This disruption has caused traditional universities to change how their curriculum is delivered and also revisit how learning occurs. While we are indeed living in challenging times, we argue that this defining moment will become the impetus for pedagogical reform wherein new methods of teaching and learning will emerge. In this paper, we bring together three broad subjects of teaching and learning scholarship: (a) learning design, (b) critical pedagogy, and (c) student partnership. We contend that together, these three fields provide room for students to become actors and agents of their own learning through student-led learning design. Using critical participatory action research (CPAR) spanning 4 years and 22 projects, this case study offers a starting point for learning designers and student partners to work together in nine different instructional design models.

KEYWORDS

student as partners, critical pedagogy, critical-digital pedagogy, learning design, operationalisation

The term "critical digital partnership" (CDP) coined here brings together learning design, critical pedagogy, and student partnership as a method to liberate learners by allowing them to shape how learning is designed. Yet, there is little to no attention being paid to the intersection of critical pedagogy and learning design in the Student-as-Partners (SaP) space. Hence, this paper aims to expand the dialogue between SaP and critical digital pedagogy. The rationale of this case study is to bring these fields together in an effort to produce a new method of student-led learning design. The hope that the outcome of this case study will bring a new conceptualisation of partnership. This model has been refined over the span of 4 years (2018–2021) across 22 different partnership projects and offers an operationalisation plan for learning designers and student partners who might need support in starting a new technology-engaged, critical digital partnership. To begin, a brief review of the literature is provided to offer context to the research question to follow. The research methodology and design follow a rich history of critical participatory action research (CPAR). This methodology is unconventional as it utilises a critical ethnographic design that

leverages longitudinal lived experience to offer insight to this new conceptualisation of critical digital student partnership offered below.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The university in which this CDP case study is placed has been fortunate to have one of the largest paid SaP programs to support staff, their classrooms, and the future of their degree programs. Student and staff partnerships were based around four major fields: teaching and learning, policy, governance, and the student experience. SaP promotes shared decision-making between learners and instructors (Bovill et al., 2011). Here, we share our own collaborative experiences encompassing SaP and the formal role of an academic digital curriculum designer. The collaborative project takes place within one of Australia's leading universities and involves the development of a critical digital curriculum that embraces a SaP ethos. The ethos driving this partnership consists of three values: reciprocity, respect, and responsibility (Liang & Matthews 2020).

For the most part, the development of student-staff partnerships has been successful, with over 22 different student partnership projects having been completed at time of writing. The objective of this case study is to shed light on (a) how a localised, context-specific framework can help to guide a CDP-SaP approach; (b) how our lessons learnt may illuminate opportunities for others; and (c) how our approach builds on the body of literature where SaP and learning design intersect to offer space for future CDP work to follow.

Critical digital pedagogy literature

The earliest scholars in critical digital pedagogy (different to CDP being presented) published a body of work that can be traced to earlier work in *Hybrid Pedagogy*, particularly an online website dedicated to digital activism (Stommel et al., 2014; Stommel et al., 2020). However, well before the rise of the *Hybrid Pedagogy* website, Sweeny (2004) published his thesis on the nature of the internet as a method of breaking and making new forms of authority, authenticity, and authorship. One decade later, Morris (2014) called critical digital pedagogy "a social justice movement first, and an educational movement second." Stommel et al., (2014) around the same time were working towards developing a working definition of the term, indicating that it needs to meet four key domains. These four domains are also critical to CDP in that it:

1. must be centred on community and collaboration in practice;
2. must remain open to diverse, international voices, and thus requires invention to reimagine the ways that communication and collaboration happen across cultural and political boundaries;
3. must not be defined by a single voice but must gather together a cacophony of voices; and
4. must have a use and application outside traditional institutions of education.

What CDP provides is a new method in which students develop collaborative partnerships with staff for the betterment of their current learning and future education. It moves away from the methodical and the product-oriented forms of education towards one that focuses on the process of change, starting with the question "Why?"

While the CDP space is new, examples of practices of its realisation are limited in the SaP literature, and the aim here is to offer a model for CDP for future learning designers and student partners to have a workable guide. To the best of our knowledge, no other researcher has melded these fields together to produce a CDP-SaP partnership through a new digital-critical curriculum strategy. Even though other examples of CDP can be found through the use of infographic and digital storytelling as a method to reach communities outside traditional library classrooms (Waddell & Clariza, 2018), examples are still in short supply in the student partnership space. It is worth giving some explanation of SaP, particularly for those new to the SaP space.

SaP literature

SaP initiatives allow students and staff to step outside their traditional roles as learners and teachers, enabling each other and valuing the necessity of each other (Barrineau et al., 2015; Jensen & Bennett, 2016). Williamson (2013) notes: "Where partnership exists, students not only identify areas for enhancement, but they help to identify ways to carry out that enhancement" (p. 8). In the current research, student partners become both drivers and catalysts for change throughout their learning experience. We take the advice of Cook-Sather et al., (2018) who suggests that shifting from an us-and-them mentality towards a shared vision of planning and implementation helps to foster an environment where students feel included and are therefore more engaged. For the sake of transparency, it should be noted that our first partnerships were very specific whereby agreements explicitly detailed that students were merely beta-testers for our own educational agenda. However, once we gained an understanding of the power imbalance in this situation, we realised how repressive this was and acknowledged our mistake. As a result, discussions of power dynamics have been embedded into training and induction processes (Cook-Sather, 2016a). A caveat here is that the suggestions we present should be considered within one's own context.

The next section briefly touches on the more practical recommendations in an effort to add to the SaP literature through learning design. To date, no other research has afforded any models in the SaP literature that encompass the critical lived experiences of learning designers with student partnership.

RESEARCH QUESTION

This study explores the research question, what does critical digital partnership look like in practice within student partnership? The aim here is to provide an example of how the intersection of student partnership and digital curriculum design can manifest itself and what steps are involved in this process. It does not propose that the research itself is objective enough to address this question in a vacuum. Rather, it is intended to prompt dialogue by providing an example of how student partners can support the cause of advancing CDP in research and in practice.

METHODOLOGY

Methods and participants

The research method employed is known broadly as critical participatory action research (CPAR), which can help to shift education from practical to critical and vice versa. The participants in this study were the researchers of this case study, as we believe that our

lived experience was the fuel that enacted change that brought learning design together with student partnership.

CPAR does this by focusing on collective involvement, action, and change (Lozenski, 2014; Mackay, 2016). Decisions on research objectives are made with a communal intent to improve the day-to-day practices of all those involved (Kemmis et al., 2014). The method requires a collective and ethical involvement in an effort for a more socially just or critical outcome. Pedagogy requires identifying what changes are needed, and continuous reflection and evaluation can support such changes. The research technique of learning-by-doing is consistent in both CPAR and participatory action research (PAR) (Kindon et al., 2007). However, the difference between CPAR and PAR is in how social relations are promoted in a way that things can be done differently. Vince et al. (2018) caution that critical action learning and action learning are different, even though they might have interconnected stages. As Kemmis et al. (2014) put it, "people involved in critical action research aim to change their social world collectively, by thinking about it differently, acting differently, and relating to one another differently" (p. 9).

Over time, the accumulation of many incremental changes catalysed a new way of thinking and delivering course material with students. We set out to challenge digital curricula with the support of our student partners. One of the main changes was the adoption of CDP, which provided theoretical and pedagogical space for students to question preconceived notions of education (Perriton & Reynolds 2004). The changes were made to move the practical or employable understandings of student partnership towards a liberating force to produce socially just, critical citizens. CPAR does research differently; it is a practical-critical research method that offers continual reflection and adaptation to our CDP-SaP process. Over the course of 4 years and 22 partnerships, the model presented is based on critical action research in an effort to provide future learning designers a model to follow in CDP.

METHOD

The CDP model was applied in the Master of Applied Linguistics program and the language curriculum, which intersected with three different fields of research: critical pedagogy, Students as Partners, and digital learning design. The following nine steps that we discuss below are not intended to be a working model, rather a guide of what worked well in this particular context (see Figure 1). Each of these steps will be discussed accordingly. The guiding framework is unique in two ways; first, it outlines how each digital design step is connected to the next, and second, students working as partners are introduced in each step. While we did not follow this plan verbatim, it became useful to ensure goals were aligned between different stakeholders. This was achieved by implementing a process of triangulation between academic staff members, student partners, and learning designers. Here, the structure and delivery methods of each course would be developed, depending on what shared goals emerged through the consultative process. This ensured that students, academic staff, and the learning designer would have input in the improvement of the course. Each project involved a different aspect of digital redevelopment from analysis to evaluation. From our experience, we found that both students and staff benefited in a variety of ways. One example is that students were able to have an impact by influencing change to what, why, and particularly how they were learning. By the same token, staff were able to modify how learning was designed,

implemented, and delivered to best suit staff needs while having the added benefit of breaking down barriers of authority and knowledge ownership to students.

FINDINGS

The reason for undertaking the steps outlined below is that in the current context no model for learning designers has been made to work alongside student partners. Incrementally, each year, we had worked on each major aspect of learning design with students. These major "steps" have been orchestrated after 4 years of student partnerships that have all taken a critical learning design approach to SaP practice. As a result, the current study embraces the subjective-critical nature of these findings within a critical-ethnographic lens of lived experience. Weekly meetings between the student partner and learning designers fuelled and added incremental improvements in learning design by asking "what could be done better?" The many lessons learnt and the incremental improvements each week offered a starting point for learning designers and student partners to consider which part of the learning process they wished to engage with.

Figure 1: A nine step critical-digital student partnership plan: Learning objectives, assessment, learning activities, technology, the hybrid flip, instructional design, learning resources, learning support, and evaluation

Step 1	Learning Objectives	Students work with staff to redefine learning objectives for more measurable, specific, and higher-order learning outcomes.
Step 2	Assessment	Students work with staff to evaluate assessment tasks to become more engaging, authentic, varied, and continuous.
Step 3	Learning Activities	Students and staff work together to develop new learning activities that are more active, flexible, and dynamic.
Step 4	Technology	Student partners work beside staff to evaluate new technology enhanced alternatives that best suit the new learning objectives, assessment, and learning activities.
Step 5	The hybrid flip/blend	Students and staff find avenues to implement changes in a new flipped, blended, or fully online environment.
Step 6	Instructional Design	Student partners work with staff to implement effective Universal Design principles alongside weekly introductions and micro-lectures.
Step 7	Learning Resources	Students and staff work together to develop more flexible, engaging, self-paced, accessible, inclusive, and self-regulated learning resources.
Step 8	Learning Support	Student partners work alongside staff to find new methods of online support that provides multiple means of support via peer-to-peer, peer-to-content, and peer-to-staff support.
Step 9	Evaluation	Students and staff work together to offer varied forms of evaluation from the partnership and the critical-digital project redesign.

Importantly, all changes after we first examined the learning objectives of the course to ensure that they were in fact, measurable, specific, attainable, and aligned with other learning resources, assessment, and activities. Furthermore, guided by Bloom's digital taxonomy (Churches, 2010), the aim was to ensure that higher order measurable verbs were used, such as "compare and contrast" instead of "comprehend" or "understand." One of the critical digital projects involved students examining current and ideal future objectives, which was quite useful for academics, students, and the learning designers. In this way, we believe that learning objectives should reflect what staff need to teach, rather than what students' need to learn. In another SaP-CDP development, an introductory video was developed by current students for future students to use. The video introduces the course lecturer, elements of the course, and the overall course objectives. As part of the redesign of the CDP-SaP assessment, we aimed to explore whether (a) multiple and varied assessment was possible and (b) if opportunities to gain feedback from low-stakes assessment were possible. Again, several student partnerships were involved in the transformation of low-stake assessment pieces to include digital technologies such as Blackboard quizzes, Kaltura videos, Padlet, Kahoot, and Flipgrid.

To be successful in this partnership program, students would need to ask themselves questions such as, "how would I assess this course differently?" and "what worked well and what didn't?" Nevertheless, we wanted students to demonstrate their competencies through a variety of methods, and we sought feedback in a variety of ways in an effort to scaffold their learning. In the next stage, titled "Activities," we drew inspiration from flipped classroom methodologies to re-examine if there were better methods than formal lecture-based instruction. Here, we found that for the most part, students preferred to watch pre-recorded lecture videos prior to class and utilise class time to work on collaborative assessment and homework activities. The various technologies recommended would depend on whether the blended redesign involved a high- or low-stakes environment, the level of involvement by student partners, and whether a flipped/blended/online mode of teaching was already in place.

Next, the instructional design aspects of the course were considered. The development of bite-sized lecture material was one of the most important of all the design principles considered in this project. In essence, micro-learning and micro-lectures were needed to ensure students remained engaged and were less likely to become distracted. Students in several projects were responsible for reconstructing old lectures into several, smaller micro-lectures containing what they believed to be the most critical parts. Next, providing online resources for students became paramount to allow students to understand course material in a variety of modes and media. In one course, students used Padlet software to develop weekly online collaboration boards that included additional resources for students to engage in course materials (e.g., *Crash Course* material on YouTube on second language acquisition). Student support was another key learning design principle employed to ensure students had access to a variety of support mechanisms, both virtually and face to face. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic placed pressure on many staff and students alike. Therefore, students developed a support link that included academic, counselling, disability, and other support on the students' homepage. This allowed students to access support services more easily. We posit that student evaluation is central to any good redevelopment. As such, evaluation should ideally occur in the early stages of a course to help evaluate how students are adjusting to the design changes. We recommended to staff that a mid-point evaluation should occur to monitor how students were progressing.

However, this was outside the control and reach of student and learning designer involvement. Nevertheless, student partners were involved in analysing initial data from the midterm survey and course insights data (using learning analytics tools) in an effort to offer academics key information about how students were performing in their courses. Giving students the opportunity to be involved in the evaluation process provides insight into their needs and what they value (Giles et al., 2004). However, at times, this information came too late for any meaningful change to occur.

DISCUSSION

Some scholars emphasise the need for partnership approaches to be inclusive of a diverse range of students, with a diverse range of academic performances (Cook-Sather, 2016a; Healey et al., 2014; Marquis et al., 2016). Unconscious bias may incline staff to choose high-achieving students due to their support-seeking behaviours and their level of engagement with other university initiatives. However, we agree that diversity in academic performance, as well as cultural and linguistic diversity, provide the necessary conditions for the development of a partnership that better reflects the diversity of the student body. As such, this research did consider these factors and included students with various academic capacities and from various cultural heritages. This situation differs from our earlier projects where we only selected high-performing students, which was later highlighted to be a shortcoming of our earlier CDP-SaP partnerships. In fact, the most academically capable were not the students we were looking for. Instead, our focus was on students seeking value in the course, rather than students whom staff may have considered appropriate. From our perspective, these students added the most value to the CDP-SaP project.

Healey et al. (2016) refer to student-staff partnership as a process: "it is a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself" (p. 7). However, this project showed that the aspect of conceptualising partnership became, in itself, an explicit outcome within the project. By naming partnership as an outcome, team members sought to continuously improve partnership through reflection and collaboration. Indeed, participation in a project that had a clear scope, goals, and timeframe became critical to fostering team cohesion. Students and staff later reflected on the project and emphasised the value of having clear roles and responsibilities, communication channels, and project implementation timeframes. The lessons learnt here were unforeseen or at least unanticipated until the project was finalised. However, we drew on our experience in each project to improve in areas such as organisation and delegation and became mindful of time constraints.

Students and staff alike reported a sense of satisfaction in achieving goals together and perhaps seeing each other in a different light. During recruitment, we assumed that the most engaged students with positive university experiences would apply for the student partner positions. However, this was not the case, and it was our short-sightedness that prevented us from engaging with a more diverse student body earlier. Our earlier projects also failed to foster a sense of connection or belonging. Monsen et al. (2017) suggest that in its early stages, partnerships can be improved by including (a) a series of ice-breaker activities, (b) group collaboration opportunities that can be made anonymous (so learners feel comfortable to share and discuss their opinions), and (c) partnership reflection activities. However, generalisations and transferability from one context to another should be tempered and carefully considered (Healey & Healey, 2017); therefore, aspects that may or may not have worked in our context may not apply to another situation or institution. It is true that student partnerships are contested, with critics suggesting that they can be

ideologically charged and institutionally controlled. However, we believe that the benefits outweigh the shortcomings, and, in our experience, partnerships extend beyond staff and students to offer a space where authentic, caring, and respectful dialogue can occur between staff and students for the betterment and purpose of critical consciousness raising. While not discussed extensively in the literature or within our work, the space and place for an end-of-project celebration provided an avenue for staff and students to share their experiences to a wider community. Therefore, we thought it noteworthy to highlight that these celebrative activities helped students make the most of their work experience and contributed to feelings of genuine partnership.

We aim to continue our projects and enable a place where staff and students can imagine a new learning experience together. This includes helping students to navigate the project and understand how they can contribute to project outcomes alongside learning designers. Integral to this approach is making time for regular conversations about balancing work and assessment. Furthermore, providing greater opportunities for students to consider how to translate their new experiences and skills into other contexts could also prove useful. Nevertheless, a key strength of this project was the ability to plan and implement a clearly defined structure through explicit goals and outcomes. The affordances of a solid research design helped to provide clear expectations and goals, from planning and recruitment through to implementation and celebration of the team's achievements. Reflection throughout each stage allowed for a richer and more authentic dialogue between staff and students. Having a core team (which consisted of a learning designer and two student partners) allowed pressure, responsibility, and accountability to be shared to achieve project outcomes. Ongoing support was provided to students by organising regular meetings where we could provide advice on overcoming challenges or undertake additional work as required. Staff were also able to assist with administrative queries relating to salary, timesheets, and reimbursement as the SaP approach at our institution was through a paid partnership for students. That not all partnerships are monetised may limit the generalisability of the case study to other institutions.

CONCLUSION

By sharing our experience, including our successes and failures, we hope to provide insight into the benefits and challenges of critical digital partnerships. The greatest contribution that supported the critical-digital bridge was the development of a design framework, which assisted in shaping and guiding each step of the project. Despite the SaP vision being core to the institution, our model was rare. It ensured that all new digital enhanced school-resourced projects needed student partnership as a prerequisite and needed to be guided by the above digital-critical SaP framework. The most pervasive challenge for students in this project was balancing work and assessment demands; therefore, we believe explicit strategies to address this should be incorporated into future partnership. Ideas include speaking more explicitly about work-study balance in induction or creating a group assessment schedule. Other ideas include using opportunities such as meetings and individual conversations to encourage students to express when they feel overwhelmed. As Cook-Sather (2014) note, student partnerships are at times "troublesome, transformative, irreversible, and integrative" (p. 186) and warn that they can be threatening, disappointing, and/or (potentially) unsettling. Indeed, navigating power dynamics was at times uneasy and exposed vulnerabilities for staff and students, but proper training, continuous reflection, and shared decision-making seemed to mitigate its effects.

Nevertheless, the current study embarked on a transformative journey of facilitating new student partnerships in the services of critical-digital design affordances. While caution has been noted regarding the generalisability of the steps in other contexts, this case study provides a method for learning designers and student partners to come together and offers a blueprint for CDP research and practice to follow.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

Seb Dianati *(corresponding author) is a Senior Teaching Fellow (Senior Lecturer) in Digital Curriculum Design at the University of Queensland. He provides academic support for academics for flipped learning, including the design, development, and implementation of blended learning. His research interests are in student as partners, critical-digital design, flipped classrooms and technology enhanced teaching and learning.*

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