

CASE STUDY

Soothing something deeper still: Reflections on an academic development-student partnership

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ABSTRACT

This case study critically reflects on the impact of the Students as Partners in Learning initiative at the University of Stirling. The authors (two academic developers and four students) explore collectively how our partnership enabled us to reimagine a shared understanding and common learning and teaching purpose among our staff and students. We draw playfully on the image of a river as our structure but also as a metaphor for our reflections. This case study aims to provide a reflective evaluation of the progress made, and lessons learnt, in this ongoing process of partnership through an open and honest conversational flow between each of the authors, opening up questions about where we go next that will undoubtedly resonate with our readers.

KEYWORDS

partnership, pandemic, academic development, collaborative writing, playfulness

Yet this night river soothes
something deeper still, I can no more name
or touch than foretell where tomorrow's gulls
will land – or try the hunger of their beaks.

—Tom Pow, “The River”

This case study invites you to dive into our reflections on an institutional Students-as-Partners initiative at the University of Stirling from August 2020 to June 2021. Inspired by Cook-Sather’s (2016) plea “to consider student-faculty partnership models as part of a more fundamental rethinking of academic development” (p.162), academic development staff wanted to explicitly embed student partnership into their work. The disruption of taken-for-granted learning and teaching practices caused by the pandemic meant we urgently needed to redesign our curricula for online learning. We knew this could not be done effectively or meaningfully without inviting students as partners in this process. Like Chan & Stacey (2020), we recognise the importance of investigating both student and staff perspectives, and so we explore the reflections of two academic developers and four student partners involved in this process.

To embody the disruption that the pandemic represented, the structure of this paper is built on a series of excerpts from the anonymised reflections of each individual author, placed along the course of the river of our journey. Staff and student reflections are presented together, further pushing the disruptive flow. This river metaphor is useful for three reasons. First, it reminds us that this experience took place in a shared place for all of us, despite the virtual spaces in which the pandemic forced us to dwell. Second, the “river” reflection (Advance HE, 2020) is a tool we use in our academic development practice, and we felt it was an apt and useful way to frame our partnership reflections with students. Finally, the river metaphor encapsulates the changing stages in the process and its disrupting, shifting nature. Above all, as the epigraph to this case study highlights, the course of a river is both purposeful and unpredictable, but there is also no way back once the current is in full flow.

INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

The initiative was launched by academic development staff as part of a wider programme of preparedness for the Autumn 2020 semester, which was conducted online due to the impact of the pandemic. A call for unpaid student volunteers was shared across the university. Twenty recruits were drawn from across the university’s five faculties, including undergraduate and postgraduate students. Following training from academic development staff, students offered a “road-testing” opportunity for staff which included testing the new online modules from a student perspective, sense-checking, and ensuring that links and content were visible. The partnership grew to include student perspectives and views on new institutional learning and teaching policies. As the trust between students and academic development staff grew, student volunteers participated in webinars and helped co-create resources for academic staff.

This collaborative process received overwhelming positive feedback—staff appreciated the students’ perspective and felt reassured by the process; students expressed joy in their roles and valued the opportunity to offer their perspectives in diverse staff projects. However, we wanted to use this case study to go beyond a shallow evaluation. To be able to honestly explore the impact so that we could share our reflections and learning with you, our readers, we needed to go deeper into our own feelings. By exploring our diverse understandings and

emotions, we reveal useful insights about developing an initiative like this sustainably, which can reveal uncomfortable questions about power and agency.

We therefore took the opportunity of this case study to write collaboratively about the process. All student partners were invited to take part. By the time of writing there were four students and two academic development partners involved. Our writing approach has been, to continue the river metaphor, free flowing. We began by using our abstract as the starting point, seeking to assign writing tasks and deadlines, none of which worked at the end of a busy and stressful academic year, with everyone in different locations and facing different priorities. Instead, we used a collaborative Word document to write, comment, and ask questions of one another until we had reached our final draft. We hope the process below captures the multivocal nature of this collaborative process, as well as some of its obstacles and surprises too. As all the authors were volunteers reflecting on their own experience, we did not seek ethical approval for this writing approach. Authors were free to withdraw their contributions at any time, and the academic developers met with the students (online) to ensure they were comfortable with the process.

THE SOURCES: EXCITEMENT YET CYNICISM

We began by reflecting on what had sparked our interest in partnership work and why we had been drawn to this model of staff-student partnership. Our reflections reveal excitement about something new and enthusiasm for making a difference. But they also show a level of cynicism, from both staff and students, about what could realistically be achieved.

Mouse

I got involved as a student partner because I was frustrated with my experience of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. There were logistical, technological, and behavioural problems preventing us from getting the most out of university. I felt like staff didn't quite understand how hard it was.

Almond

On reading the application information, I first thought that the opportunity seemed too good to be true—a chance to work alongside staff to make the changes required to ensure that our next academic year was as successful as possible for all involved. When I received the news that I had been accepted, and given some dates for training, I still wasn't sure this would be an initiative that would work.

Findhorn

While I loved the words often used to describe this partnership work—trust, empathy, honesty, and hope (Felten, 2019)—I wasn't sure how they would translate into our institutional culture, particularly in this online setting. It had been a long time since I'd worked directly with students collectively and I was curious; I wanted to meet the students at my institution. I'd heard so many colleagues talk of their frustrations and joy with students, but I'd only seen them at a distance in my teaching observations of colleagues. I'd witnessed yawns, and lots of use of

social media. I'd also seen furious notetaking and many earnest contributions from students in seminars. I'd heard questions, laughter, whispers, exclamations.

Inver

I was a part of a team that had set out the principles and guidance for how to proceed with online learning. One of these principles was for staff to “engage students as responsible partners in their learning.” This, then, could be seen as the source for me: the need to demonstrate what such partnership could mean in practice. That way of describing the process plays into two sceptical views I had at the start of this initiative: (a) such partnerships are tokenistic in the sense that they provide a surface level impression of collaboration without genuine and meaningful dialogue (for both staff and students), and (b) these partnerships don't change much—a few tweaks here and there—because of that, but nothing substantive.

Forth

It is not that I actually had expectations. I read something around piloting new learning activities and helping to shape new material for future students' hands, and I was curious to try. Maybe group discussions? Meeting staff and giving feedback? Getting module preparations and giving suggestions? It could be anything. And it turned out to be everything.

THE RAPIDS: TRAINING AND COLLABORATION

The speed of the process struck several of us: how quickly from forming we moved into training and collaboration for the task of road-testing the new modules for Autumn 2020. We were still unsure how this project would be received by academic staff.

Inver

The recruitment and training of the students was a fast-flowing, rapid, experience. I remember thinking through the training that we (my academic development colleague and I) were flooding the students with so much information: what had been done to improve the virtual learning environment (VLE), the staff development work done over the summer, an exemplar module to explore, how to provide effective feedback, and various templates and guidance. I liked the students we had recruited, but I had no idea if this partnership was going to work, or what the staff reaction would be.

Forth

Being a rather diverse group of people, everyone had some distinct perspective. In group discussions we oftentimes figured out that there was a consensus on the issues to be addressed—but the possible solutions varied widely. This seemed to produce rich collections of possible ways forward, as well as a deepening the understanding of the teaching staff on the other sides of the cameras. The project aimed to help the entire staff and student body, and I tried to represent a part of them—as they all did. We seemed to realise it as a try, though, coming from some individuals in zeal, openness, and honesty gathering their personal notions.

Mouse

It wasn't an easy context in which to build partnership, but the academic development team put a lot of effort into maintaining an equitable and respectful environment, acknowledging each person's (staff or student) experience and expertise. That allowed empathy to bubble up. I collaborated with staff on projects, which felt more genuinely constructive than one-sided feedback activities. There was a sense of shared agency.

Inver

Building partnership in an online setting was challenging. The usual tools we could use in face-to-face settings were unavailable, and the little things like body language were missing. I think I've got better at online teaching, but creating a genuine connection remains difficult. Our approach was to use Microsoft Teams for meetings, which enables chat and voice functions, as well as the ability to share files and work collaboratively on documents. We also created a Team for ongoing discussion and sharing of ideas between formal sessions.

THE CONFLUENCE: FLOWING TOGETHER

Partnerships formed and training completed, road-testing commenced. Staff requested road tests of modules ahead of the Autumn 2020 semester, and student reviewers were given access to the relevant VLE pages. Student partners then completed a short feedback form focussing on the structure, logic, and accessibility of their allocated module. Initially, module appraisals were reviewed by academic development staff. Things were beginning to flow, and a sense of joint ownership and shared direction was being created.

Mouse

Doing my first road test was great: it felt co-operative and productive. I was helping; my experience was useful. I also came to understand that the tutor whose module I was reviewing was nervous presenting her work. She treated me with complete professionalism and was respectful of my time. I learned a lot from that.

Inver

As the energy and force of the student engagement developed, though, we found ourselves cutting through challenging questions and terrain. The feedback students provided to staff on their modules was excellent: enhancement-led, sensitive, and framed in a supportive way. The staff who submitted their modules to student scrutiny were brave, but also genuine in their responses—and made significant changes to module design, signposting, and accessibility from the student feedback.

Almond

As the semester moved on there were more and more opportunities being presented to us, which excited me. We were being asked to take part in podcasts, webinars and behind-the-scenes discussions which I had never even known happened. The more of these opportunities I took part in (there were many), the more I realized that our academic team, both the two mentors we had and the wider staff, were open to this change. They were listening and learning from what we had to say and that was exciting.

Forth

The vital part here is the collaborative discussion. A give and take. I would have imagined it more the way I gather feedback to give: taking a matter and counting down everything connected to it. But that has a dead end. When now someone threw in their thought, this sparked dozens of thoughts in other people, triggering new meanings and discussion points. I realised that feedback collecting has a natural limit, while these group exchanges had to be limited manually. The amount we got together, the abundance of exciting proposals, progressive approaches and concepts—this is what again and again creates a warm stomach of pride.

WIDENING OUT: A BROADER REACH

As the work for Autumn 2020 began to subside, we all reflected on what more could be done with this partnership. The two academic developers began to think about how student involvement in their work could be taken further. Students recognised the deep impact their work had made.

Inver

The role of the students developed and widened out over the course of the academic year. Students played an active role in the work of academic development—including the recording of podcasts and videos, the creation of materials that we used on our Postgraduate Certificate in Learning & Teaching in Higher Education, and participating in staff development sessions. This widening, I think, helped me to challenge my scepticism. There really was dialogue with some staff, leading to change in teaching, but also helping the students to see and feel where their lecturers were coming from.

Findhorn

At an early webinar on student engagement where two student partners contributed, they immediately interrupted and engaged with the content, contradicting some points and validating others. Suddenly I realised what McKenna (2012) meant when he talked about the role of academic development to bring about disruption (as quoted in Mercer-Mapstone, 2020): our students were disrupting and staff were listening. This felt radical. I was a mediator, almost invisible, and the staff members were speaking openly and honestly about their experiences as well as their fears and worries about the year that lay ahead. This was a genuine “significant conversation” (Stacey & Chan, 2021) that I will never forget. It made me see what was possible by working with students as partners in academic development.

Over time, we began to co-design sessions and resources with some of our students as partners. Again and again, I witnessed similar levels of disruption and, above all, of careful listening from both students and staff.

Lunan

I have enjoyed working with the academic development team as I have felt welcome and a part of the team from the beginning. During the meetings with the university’s staff and at the conferences, I felt that my opinion and observations were appreciated and taken into

account. The focus group sessions that were conducted with both staff members and students being present at the same time also showed that both parties prefer a more collegial relationship instead of a hierarchical one, which was a great thing to witness.

THE DELTA: LESSONS LEARNED OR DRIFTING OFF?

To bring our reflections to a close, we considered what has been learnt from this process and how it might develop in the future. We are all excited to develop the process further. But, mirroring how we started, there is still some cynicism lurking under the surface.

Almond

I am excited to see where this new academic year leads us and to see what else we will be able to change and shape to make the university the best version of itself, for the staff, student, and wider community.

Mouse

I think proper partnership requires staff to cede some power, which could be unnerving. In the development events we ran, there was still reluctance, but I think giving this work a formal platform in the university is helpful. The pandemic disruption seemed to batter people, but I think it also increased openness to or acceptance of change. And what about students? I felt so many benefits from being involved, but our student group were among the most engaged. How to involve the less engaged? Perhaps we need to think about embedding partnership into everyday teaching and learning.

Findhorn

Of course, there is the (cynical?) part of me that knows those participating staff and students are already the engaged, the willing, and the curious. Nonetheless, something powerful happened in those spaces. We can know the theory on student partnership but, in context, this theory is not always easy to put into practice. Institutional students from different disciplines and with different learning experiences sharing their views with the same institutional staff and vice versa, with the academic developer as mediator—that is academic development gold dust that can make you tingle. This is not sink or swim, but it is a current that can take you somewhere exciting.

CONCLUSION: WHERE WILL TOMORROW'S GULLS LAND?

In our stories above, we've highlighted our individual perspectives as well as the role of disruption in the form of challenging preconceptions and expectations within the broader context of the disruption wrought by the pandemic. These stories flow and shape our case study, leaving us with the natural "what next?" question about whether we can ride the wave of disruption and take momentum from it to continue to wobble the centre of power. Life won't be back to normal next year either.

What has been critical to a feeling of impact has been creating a culture of mutual respect which bred empathy and made significant conversations possible. However, there is also something serendipitous here, with students partners and staff alike sensing how to proceed and taking advantage of natural opportunities to select activities that were meaningful

rather than tokenistic. This is where our river metaphor depicts how the process had its course altered and where it ebbed and flowed, and while the waters might be calmer next year, we are entering a new valley now. NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

Professor Catriona Cunningham heads up the Department of Learning & Teaching Enhancement at the University of Edinburgh Napier in Scotland where she leads on strategic learning and teaching priorities across the institution. She is passionate about higher education and is particularly interested in interculturalism in HE, student engagement and academic identities.

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Ida Caspary is a computing science student at the University of Stirling who joined the Students as Partners in Learning project in second year. She loves reading everything that she comes across, as well as swimming and playing the cello.

Sarah Gardiner is a 4th year Psychology student at the University of Stirling as well as a single mum to her son Thomas. She is interested in HE and feels there is a need to build better working relationships between staff and students to ensure that everyone is able to have the best learning experience possible.

Fanni Tanka is now doing a PhD in Geography at Loughborough University and is based at the UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology in Lancaster and working in soil ecology.

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