

EDITORIAL

Expanding student expertise through a diversification of genres and roles

***Alison Cook-Sather**, Education Department, Bryn Mawr College, USA.

Nandeeta Bala, Class of 2022, Vassar College, USA.

Contact: acooksat@brynmawr.edu

The *International Journal for Students as Partners (IJSaP)* is entering its 8th year of publishing analyses of partnership work as well as challenging traditional notions of a journal's operational processes (Cliff et al., 2017). The creation of the journal and its intentional positioning of students as co-editors, reviewers, authors, and members of the journal's international advisory group were choices informed by a belief in student expertise (Cook-Sather, Healey, & Matthews, 2021). This belief sometimes needs to be renewed as circumstances shift, such as under pandemic conditions (Ntem et al., 2020). It can also inform the creation of new roles that not only affirm student expertise but also support its further development (Cook-Sather, this issue).

In this editorial, we shine a light on several examples of expanding student expertise. We use 'expanding' here both as a description of student expertise and of actions that support the further development of student expertise. In other words, we emphasize both the growth of student expertise in their roles as student partners and in intentional actions that support that expertise. We co-author this editorial from deep combined experience in the field of students as partners—Alison is a faculty member and co-founder of *IJSaP* who has facilitated a student-faculty pedagogical partnership program for nearly two decades, consulted on partnership program development around the world, and published widely on partnership work, and Nandeeta is a recent college graduate who has been a student partner and partnership program developer at her own and other institutions as well as author, editor, and editorial board member for *IJSaP*.

Drawing on our shared and respective experiences, we focus on three forms that expanding student expertise has taken. These are the diversification of genres to capture partnership work, of student engagement under unprecedented (such as pandemic) conditions, and of student partner roles in the development of partnership programs. While there are other forms of diversification that expand student expertise, we focus on those that we have been involved in directly and extensively.

EXPANDING STUDENT EXPERTISE THROUGH A DIVERSIFICATION OF GENRES

As noted above, the premise that students have expertise informed the creation of *IJSaP*: “Recognizing students as authors, reviewers, advisors, and editors in academic writing acknowledges students’ expertise and the value of their unique perspectives” (Cook-Sather, Healey, & Matthews, 2021, p. 1). While students bring expertise to the production and review of all genres in which partnership work is published, reflective essays (included since the launch of *IJSaP*) and Voices from the Field (a more recent addition to the journal’s sections) have expanded the opportunities for student expertise to inform conversations about learning and teaching.

Student authors of reflective writing suggest that the genre does not require one “to have all of the answers,” that “there are fewer, if any, value judgments” in relation to reflective essays, and that “through allowing that openness and honesty more findings can eventually make their way forward” (quoted in Cook-Sather et al., 2019, p. 23). These are comments about the potential of the reflective essay genre to accommodate student expertise (as well as the expertise of faculty and staff who are not driven by the particular standards of other genres), thereby expanding audiences for student experience and knowledge that might otherwise remain unarticulated and almost certainly unpublished. Relatedly, another student author argues that the reflective essay genre allows “more perspectives to be uncovered and valued as more people might see themselves as having a voice and value as a contributor” (quoted in Cook-Sather et al., 2019, p. 23). This student author imagines that “with these additional voices, . . . knowledge might be constructed differently and more fully than if it was limited to rigid definitions of both writing and representation” (Cook-Sather et al., 2019, p. 23). These arguments demonstrate that expanding what counts as expertise makes space for more diverse voices, thereby expanding ways of knowing.

Voices from the Field goes a step further in diversifying genres, striving to “support the voices of those who might not normally be represented within traditional forms of academic publishing and/or who do not have time for, or interest in, working through the peer-review process but who have something to say” (Cook-Sather, Slates, et al., 2021, p. 146)—particularly students. In adding this genre to *IJSaP*, we expanded spaces for students to share their expertise and we expanded student expertise—as authors, editors, and readers. Nandeeta’s skill as an artist and her expertise as a student partner, program developer, and editor inspired us to diversify this genre to include artistic or visual representations of partnership (Cook-Sather et al., 2022). These representations affirmed student expertise in another medium of expression as well as on partnership work.

EXPANDING STUDENT EXPERTISE THROUGH UNPRECEDENTED CIRCUMSTANCES

During times of duress, people can sometimes revert to more traditional roles and responsibilities. But as the pandemic taught us, embracing student expertise is a powerful alternative. Writing about partnership during the years of the pandemic when school closures and physical distancing measures were in place, Anita Ntem and several fellow *IJSaP* student co-editors (2020) cautioned that we need to “be wary of how the uptake of virtual-only formats may lead to new, superficial forms of partnership that claim to incorporate student voices without devoting serious effort to exploring notions of power, agency, and expertise” (p. 3). Simply relying on student facility with technology, for instance, does not necessarily constitute

recognition of student expertise in learning, teaching, or partnership. It is possible to create roles for students that do draw on their expertise, however.

Both independently and together, we have been involved in developing roles in which students bring their expertise to educational practice and to partnership. For instance, we convened a group of student partners from nine institutions in the Spring of 2020 to gather perspectives on how to support students as learners and people during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic (Cook-Sather & Litvitskiy, 2020). To expand and continue to support these connections, we created the [Pairing Student Partners](#) program, through which student partners in universities across the world were (and continue to be) paired with one another to develop new relationships, learn about one another's contexts and practices, and support pedagogical partnership work.

In another response to the pandemic-prompted need to develop online and hybrid forums, Nandeeta and other student partners co-facilitated forums in which faculty, staff, and students engaged in dialogue (Cook-Sather & Bala, 2022), and students "modeled the kind of non-judgmental openness to questions, concerns, and ideas that they recommended we exhibit in the classroom" (staff member quoted in Cook-Sather, 2022, p. 129). Finally, co-developed by Alison and another student partner, an approach to using co-created, shared Google Docs to build a trauma-informed classroom space and inclusive practices drew on the student partner's expertise as a student, teacher, and partner (Cook-Sather & Nguyen, 2023). In research we conducted on the supportive resources we created, we found that participants greatly appreciated the insights and connections they gained from cross-constituency dialogue and the deeper awareness of inequity and commitment to empathy and engagement they had developed (Cook-Sather & Bala, 2022).

We will no doubt face other unprecedented circumstances—such as the burgeoning of generative AI. Embracing student expertise and seeking to partner with students (Tan, 2023) under such conditions will also, we propose, lead to the kind of deepening of capacity that the examples we share above fostered.

EXPANDING STUDENT EXPERTISE THROUGH PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

As Alison discusses in a reflective essay in this volume, she has seen the expansion of student expertise in supporting the development of pedagogical partnership work in numerous new positions created for student partners. In her essay, she discusses three models she has co-created with students, faculty, and staff in the order that she developed them; here, we list them in the order in which students might experience them. First, current undergraduates can co-create partnership programs at their home institutions drawing on their particular identities, lived experiences, and associated expertise as they have done at Davidson College, Vassar College, Tufts University, Syracuse University, Lahore University of Management Sciences, and elsewhere (see [issue 33 of *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*](#)). Second, current undergraduates from one institution can co-create a new partnership program at another institution, drawing both on their particular identities and lived experiences and on their experiences and expertise in partnership work at their home institution (Bala, 2022a, Cook-Sather, 2022). Third, recent graduates who worked in an institution with a partnership program can co-create new partnership programs at other institutions by drawing both on their

particular identities and lived experiences and on their experiences of and expertise gained in partnership as undergraduates (see Ortquist-Ahrens, 2021).

All three models assume that students have expertise to contribute to processes of preparing for, reflecting on, and revising teaching and learning practices (Cook-Sather et al., 2014) based on their experiences as students and on their unique intersections of socio-cultural identities and lived experiences as people in the wider world, which they bring to educational contexts and analyses (Brown et al., 2020; Cook-Sather et al., 2021; Doktor et al., 2019; Matthews, 2017). While the first model builds expertise in and through pedagogical partnership work, the second and third models build on and apply that expertise in new contexts and expand and nurture connections among partnership programs.

Nandeeta has experienced all three of these models over the last few years. As an undergraduate, she co-led the development of the Student Teacher Engaged Pedagogical Partnership (STEPP) program at her undergraduate institution, Vassar College, by integrating her background in humanities and STEM with her passion for inclusive education (Bala, 2021). While at Vassar developing her pedagogical partnership skills and knowledge, she was able to virtually support the creation of the Community Learning & Inclusivity Partnership (CLIP) program at Emmanuel College by facilitating meetings for student and faculty partners and documenting the pilot (Bala 2022a, 2022b). As a recent graduate with experience in partnership work across institutions, Nandeeta prepared student partners at McGill University to gain feedback and facilitation skills to co-lead and sustain their program. Participating in these three models proved mutually beneficial for the institutions, its members, and Nandeeta. While contributing to the development of pedagogical partnership programs across institutions, Nandeeta also learned immensely by building leadership and communication skills and fostering valuable relationships.

CONCLUSION

The expansion of genres in journals, of forms of student engagement under unprecedented circumstances, and of student roles in co-creating partnership programs creates a plethora of opportunities for diverse voices and forms of knowledge to inform pedagogical conversations and practices. While increasing the accessibility of engaging in pedagogical partnership work, these three possibilities also strengthen the transformative power of relationships: both to people and to knowledge. We cannot quantify the value of a deeply personal reflective essay that changed the way we think about care in teaching, of an insightful comment on a virtual forum that altered how we consider assessment, or of a sense of pride and empowerment when we witness students co-creating programs involving faculty and staff. By beautifully blending notions of teaching and learning, even in intangible ways, expanding partnership celebrates its very essence by establishing resilient relationships and nurturing a global sense of community.

As circumstances continue to shift and structures and commitments continue to evolve in higher education institutions, we hope that the expansion of student expertise will continue. For instance, in response to the rise of generative AI, we need to trust students (Tan, 2023) and reconsider “notions of power, agency, and expertise” (Ntem et al., 2021, p. 3) as we learn to work with, rather than try to resist, this technology. As another example, the diversity of student identities and experiences in higher education is increasing, and among this diversity is

disabled students. Rather than continue to consider disabled individuals as “deficient” and in need of service interventions, a partnership approach “draws on disabled students’ expertise to address barriers within the institutional environment” (Brown et al. 2020, p. 100), thereby helping to shift “from an accommodation culture to an equity culture” (Cook-Sather & Cook-Sather, 2023). Students can also play a pivotal role by supporting and developing community-engaged learning. They can build ties from their academic institutions to neighboring communities by partnering with leaders in community centers to see how faculty, staff, and students might contribute to and learn from local initiatives and projects (whether through a campus job, academic credit, or volunteering). Engaging partnership to bridge multiple boundaries would be invaluable to all partners’ growth and to the institutional and cultural relationship between universities and the community.

The three forms of expanding student expertise through the diversification of genres and roles that we discuss here at once substantiate student capacity and offer ideas that can inspire other ways to expand student expertise. We hope this is a trend that continues in response to need as well as on student, faculty, and staff initiative.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Mick Healey for helpful feedback and suggestions on drafts of this editorial.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

Alison Cook-Sather is Mary Katharine Woodworth Professor of Education at Bryn Mawr College and director of the Teaching and Learning Institute at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges. She has supported the development of pedagogical partnership work on six continents, published over 100 articles, and authored or co-authored nine books. Founding editor of *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education* and founding co-editor of *International Journal for Students as Partners*, Alison was awarded the Alumni Excellence in Education Award by Stanford University’s Graduate School of Education in 2022. Learn more about her work at www.alisoncooksather.com.

Nandeeta Bala graduated from Vassar College in 2022, double majoring in cognitive science and education and minoring in chemistry. While at Vassar, she co-created and coordinated the [Student Teacher Engaged Pedagogical Partnership \(STEPP\)](#) program for over 100 participants over 2 years. She co-created the [Pairing Student Partners](#) program to build intercollegiate collaboration across 20 universities in three countries. She has since supported the development of partnership work at multiple institutions and has published over seven articles on pedagogical partnership and edited issues of *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education* and *International Journal for Students as Partners*.

REFERENCES

- Bala, N. (2022b). Exploring the personal and professional work of pedagogical partnership at Vassar College. *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, 36.
<https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss36/1>
- Bala, N. (2022a). Launching a pedagogical partnership program at Emmanuel College. *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, 35.
<https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss35/1>
- Bala, N. (2021). A STEPP into uncertainty: Pursuing passions to embrace pedagogical risks. *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, 33.
<https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss33/4>
- Brown, K., de Bie, A., Aggarwal, A., Joslin, R., Williams-Habibi, S., & Sivanesanathan, V. (2020). Students with disabilities as partners: A case study on user testing an accessibility website. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 4(2), 97–109.
<https://doi.org/10.15173/ij sap.v4i2.4051>
- Cliffe, A., Cook-Sather, A., Healey, M., Healey, R., Marquis, E., Matthews, K. E., Mercer-Mapstone, L., Ntem, A., Puri, V., & Woolmer, C. (2017). Launching a journal about and through students as partners. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 1(1).
<https://doi.org/10.15173/ij sap.v1i1.3194>
- Cook-Sather, A. (2022). *Co-creating equitable teaching and learning: Structuring student voice in higher education*. Harvard Education Press.
- Cook-Sather, A., Abbot, S., & Felten, P. (2019). Legitimizing reflective writing in SoTL: “Dysfunctional Illusions of Rigor” revisited. *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*, 7(2).
<http://dx.doi.org/10.20343/teachlearningqu.7.2.2>
- Cook-Sather, A., Bovill, C., & Felten, P. (2014). *Engaging students as partners in learning & teaching: A guide for faculty*. Jossey-Bass.
- Cook-Sather, A., & Bala, N. (2022). When distance deepens connections: How intercollegiate partnership programs support empathetic, engaged, and equitable teaching approaches. *Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal*, 4(2), 128–145.
<https://sehej.raise-network.com/raise/article/view/1066>
- Cook-Sather, A., & Cook-Sather, M. (2023). From reporting to removing barriers: Transforming accommodation culture into equity culture. *Education Sciences*, 13(6), 611.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci13060611>

- Cook-Sather, A., Healey, M., & Matthews, K. E. (2021). Recognizing students' expertise and insights in expanding forms of academic writing and publishing about learning and teaching. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 5(1), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.15173/ij sap.v5i1.4626>
- Cook-Sather, A., & Litvitskiy, N. (2020). Student partners' recommendations regarding remote teaching and learning [Online resource]. <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1rNnVPJNukBuW3SDUQH zWBJ7u7GJmmlJB-ZBcWa65jGs/edit>
- Cook-Sather, A. & Nguyen, V. (2023). Using shared Google docs to co-create life-affirming learning: A case of trauma-informed instructional design at the tertiary level. *The Journal of Applied Instructional Design*, 12(1). https://edtechbooks.org/jaid_12_1/using_shared_google
- Cook-Sather, A., Slates, S, Acai, A., Baxter, J., Bond, R., Lowe, T., Zurcher, H., O'Brien, J., Tavares, V., Lewe, M.-T., Khan, A., Poole, H., Smith, A. C., Iqbal, M. Z., Arm, K., Escobar Lema, J. E., Groening, J., Garg, K., Bello Rinaudo, N. L., Crisp, N., Mukherji, M., Addy, T., Lewis, L. M., Vayada, P., Zhang, M., Liang, Y. (S.), Rodgers, H. B., Judd, M.-M., Szucs, B., Thompson, D., Schmidt, S., Semos, I., Watchman Smith, N., Pfeifer-Luckett, R., Bala, N., Chia, M.-D., Kochhar-Lindgren, G., Leung, L., Lys, I., Matthews, K., Zou, T., & Lewis, R. (2021). Diversifying students-as-partners participants and practices. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 5(1), 146–159. <https://doi.org/10.15173/ij sap.v5i1.4627>
- Cook-Sather, A., Slates, S. E., Bala, N., Amer, A., Anthony, H., Cachia, C., Cassidy, A., Freer Conley, C., Costello, K., DeVita, J. M., Souto Galvan, A., Howells, M., Kapur, M., Kizimchuk, S., Kladder, J., Liao, C., Medland, E., Mori, Y., Morrin, A. M., Nyrose, S., O'Connor, R., Pountney, G., Selby, M., Sipos, Y., & Srinivasan, S. (2022). The art of partnership: Expanding representations and interpretations. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 6(2), 135–152. <https://doi.org/10.15173/ij sap.v6i2.5315>
- Doktor, S., Bach, D., Abbot, S., & Hardin, J. (2019). At the threshold: A case study of a partnership between a student organization and an educational development center. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 3(1), 150–159. <https://doi.org/10.15173/ij sap.v3i1.3511>
- Matthews, K. E. (2017). Five propositions for genuine students as partners practice. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 1(2), 109. <https://doi.org/10.15173/ij sap.v1i2.3315>
- Ntem, A., Nguyen, E., Rafferty, C., Kwan, C. & Benlahcene, A. (2020). Students as partners in crisis? Student co-editors' perspectives on COVID-19, values, and the shift to virtual spaces, *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 4(2). <https://doi.org/10.15173/ij sap.v4i2.4432>
- Cook-Sather, A., & Bala, N. (2023). Expanding student expertise through a diversification of genres and roles. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 7(2). <https://doi.org/10.15173/ij sap.v7i2.5594>

Ortquist-Ahrens, L. (2021). Building partnership through partnership: Reflections on the role of post-baccalaureate fellows in program development. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, 5(2), 191–197. <https://doi.org/10.15173/ij sap.v5i2.4618>

Tan, E. (2023). Partnership in the age of generative artificial intelligence. *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, 39. <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss39/3>