CASE STUDY

Leading a faculty-wide peer-support programme for widening participation students: Learning from the personal and professional development of an undergraduate intern

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ABSTRACT

Whilst existing research has explored the impact of a peer support role on the holistic development of mentees and mentors, very little is known about the experiences of those students who work in partnership alongside academic and service colleagues in co-creating, implementing, and delivering these programs. In this exploratory case study, the unique aspect was to use the P.O.W.E.R Reflective Framework for Students-as-Partners Practices and Processes to contextualise an undergraduate intern's experiences of leading a project and the consequent impact it has had upon their personal and professional development. Key findings and reflections from the intern's interview provide a deeper understanding of the peer mentor experience, highlighting aspects that are often overlooked or not readily apparent. The value of these activities for interns and how best to support their needs, motivations, and expectations are shared, as are implications for academic and service colleagues involved in promoting collaborative learning and mentoring.

KEYWORDS

co-creation, partnership, peer support, students as partners, widening participation

One approach that has been consistently used to support the transitioning of student cohorts through higher education (HE) is peer support. Studies spanning several decades across the international HE sector highlight the many benefits that these initiatives can offer with supporting retention, progression, and success metrics (Goodman-Wilson, 2021; Hillier et al., 2019). This is particularly evident in aiding recently arrived students to make new friendships and networks and build the confidence to fully engage with the academic demands of their programme (Buddeberg-Fischer & Herta, 2006; Collings et al., 2016; Foy & Keane, 2018; Naidoo et al., 2021).

OVERVIEW OF TEAM AND PROJECT

In September 2021, a 21-year-old second-year female undergraduate student (hereafter referred to as Regina) was appointed as a year-long paid intern to work in partnership with three academics from departments across Health and Life Sciences at Northumbria University who had experience in leading peer support, widening participation (WP), and equality, diversity and inclusion projects at institutional, national, and international levels. The aim was to design, implement, and deliver a small-scale peer-support initiative called SI-PASS, or Supplemental Instruction–Peer-Assisted Study Sessions. SI-PASS is an educational model based on collaborative learning and developed in the 1970s by Deanna Martin at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. Students meet regularly in small study groups with 5 to 15 participants under the leadership of an older student who has previously taken the course and who acts as a role model and guide, but not as a teacher (Lund University, 2021b). All three academics completed the internationally recognised SI-PASS training in April 2021 and shared similar principles in regards to student partnership work (Lund University, 2021a).

Regina was an undergraduate Business Management student with interest and expertise in social media and content creation. Having completed her secondary and further education in South Africa, she spent time at a university in southern England before enrolling at Northumbria University. Regina had strong communication and independent working skills, engaged regularly in Student Union initiatives, and was a member of a society group for international students.

DEFINITION OF PARTNERSHIP AND OUR PROJECT

The term "students as partners" seeks to capture an aspiration of working together within HE in a way that rejects hierarchies (Cook-Sather et al., 2019). Working with students as partners is "a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision-making, implementation, investigation, or analysis" (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, p. 6–7). By working as a collaborative team with Regina as an equal partner, we sought to deconstruct hierarchies so that everyone worked towards a shared goal.

The collaborative approach we took therefore aided partnership working and created an opportunity for all partners to contribute equally by recognising the expertise and contributions provided by all. Between October and November 2021, Regina and the academic team met fortnightly to discuss progress and share ideas for the project design and implementation. Regina also liaised regularly with key institutional supportive bodies (e.g., Student Union colleagues), keeping them updated on progress and working collaboratively to help widely publicise the initiative and its potential benefits. Between January 2022 and May 2022, the project ran as a series of monthly 60-minute workshops across a faculty of five departments. Regina was responsible for the initiation, development, recruitment, and delivery of the cross-faculty initiative. This was collaboratively supported by the remaining academic authors. The primary aim was to extend peer-support opportunities to all first-year undergraduate students within the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences at Northumbria University, but especially those

students defined as widening participation and support them to acquire the study and transferable skills necessary for successful academic and social integration.

WIDENING PARTICIPATION STUDENTS

Entering and succeeding at university can be complex and challenging for all students, regardless of background and experience (Gravett & Winstone, 2021). This is especially the case for WP students arriving from non-traditional and lesser privileged backgrounds who often must operate under extreme financial pressures (Crozier et al., 2008) and are more likely to encounter discrimination, disruption, and a degree of social exclusion (Reay et al., 2010; Reay, 2018). Research shows that WP students are more likely to drop out of higher education, achieve poorer degree outcomes, and have greater family, work, and caring commitments to contend with than peers from more traditional backgrounds (Hayman et al., 2024; Reay, 2018).

The project was undertaken at Northumbria University renowned nationally for teaching excellence (hereafter referred to as NU). Ensuring fair access and opportunity for all is a key objective underlined in the institution's 2024/25–2027/28 *Access and Participation Plan* (University of Northumbria at Newcastle, 2024). While NU already had some pre-existing peer-support schemes running in specific disciplines, including sport, nursing, and business, these were not explicitly introduced with WP students in mind. Project findings indicate how the scheme helped first-year undergraduates to settle promptly and happily into university settings and supported their developing sense of belonging and identity with fellow mentees.

OUR PHILOSOPHY FOR THIS CASE STUDY

NU has strict hierarchies of power in learning and teaching. This can impact our way of being and our confidence; therefore, power relations can act as a barrier to self-efficacy. Power is not just what someone perceives themselves to have but how others perceive that person and their position. Consequently, students working closely with academic staff may be particularly aware of asymmetrical power relations within an institution. Peer mentors are usually full-time students, taking on a mentor role in addition to their studies. Regina was employed as a full-time intern for this role to ensure we could work in an open, collaborative partnership. It would be natural for a student intern to have concerns about the usefulness of their approach, their confidence in presenting their findings to the team, and how they might be received. Moreover, internalised ideas of power can lead to a feeling of being in a position of vulnerability and lacking in power within the perceived hierarchy, which can be a barrier to knowledge sharing. The challenge was to unpack power and focus on developing a collaborative, mutual partnership. In this project, we were careful to identify common interests that exist amongst the whole team, to uncover motivations to be involved, and to encourage all partners to bring past experiences and insights to the project.

CASE STUDY AIMS

Whilst existing research has explored the impact of a peer-support role on the holistic development of mentees and mentors (e.g., Davies & Allan, 2014; Keenan, 2014; Hayman et al.,

2022), little is known about the experiences of those students who work in partnership in co-creating, implementing, and delivering these programs (Cook-Sather et al.,2014; Cook-Sather et al., 2019; Mercer-Mapstone & Abbot, 2020). In this exploratory case study (Yin, 2014), we explore how involvement in this project as a student partner has had an impact on Regina and the extent to which we successfully dismantled hierarchies so that Regina felt empowered to lead and make change, as well as the consequent impact it had upon Regina's personal and professional development. Key findings and reflections on the value of these activities for interns and how best to support their needs, motivations, and expectations are shared, as well as implications for academic and service colleagues involved in promoting collaborative learning and mentoring.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The unique aspect of this study was the use of the P.O.W.E.R (power, openness, willingness, ethnocentrism, and reflexivity) Reflective Framework for Students-as-Partners Practices and Processes (Smith et al., 2019) to contextualise the findings. Once institutional ethics was granted, Regina was invited to be interviewed by the fourth author who was familiar with the P.O.W.E.R framework and SI-PASS project. Regina undertook an audio-recorded 60-minute semi-structured interview that explored her positionality in the project; openness in involvement, goals, and process; willingness to engage with academics, participants, and the project; ethnocentrism in terms of self, academics, and project participants; and reflexivity (or, reflection on the self). Questions were open-ended and supplemented by probes to draw greater depth and meaning from responses. This enabled Regina to guide the direction of the interview rather than have it dictated by the schedule, making it possible to follow up on any additional information discussed (Morse, 2018).

The interview was transcribed verbatim and analysed through reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). In the data analysis phase, the fourth author read the transcript multiple times. Notes reflecting domain summaries were created for each of the elements of the P.O.W.E.R framework by summarising Regina's responses to the interview questions that related to these, thereby enabling statements and their meanings to be identified (Morse, 2018). Thematic coding employed a deductive approach, which is recommended for qualitative analysis when existing theories are being tested (Morse, 2018). Direct quotes representing each domain were then selected. The final stage involved the fourth author developing written accounts from identified themes, which Regina then member-checked, aiding rigour and trustworthiness (Yin, 2014).

OUTCOMES

Positionality
Positionality involves individuals taking up a position within a context, such as a partnership, and constructing meaning from this position (Smith, et al, 2019). Reflecting on her experience with the academic team, Regina expected the project to be hierarchical: "I expected an extremely strict routine," she commented. She also felt she would have less power: "I did feel I was going to feel like a student, a bit small within something big." This expectation stemmed

partly from cultural norms, which Regina explained in the following way: "I come from a small town in South Africa, it is always known to have respect for elders and treat them a different way to how you talk to peers."

However, Regina emphasized the value of the collaborative partnership approach: "It's amazing to see a student like myself being in these positions," she commented. Through increasing awareness of her positionality, she considered power relationships at all project stages. As an intern, she faced challenges with hierarchy and working as an equal partner. She noted: "When working with students, I emphasized that I am also a student at university to help make them more comfortable," but she found it challenging to navigate power relations when responses to her messages were slow: "I wanted to build communications . . . but being online made it difficult. . . . [You] can't express your feelings and expressions properly virtually." This led her to broaden her communication and project management skills.

Regina successfully constructed meaning from the partnership through multiple dimensions. Feedback from the PALS/SI-PASS: The Leader Experience Conference and interactions with peers and faculty enriched her understanding of her professional and personal growth. She reflected: "Presenting our project at the conference and receiving feedback was a significant moment. It made me realize the impact of our work and how much I had grown professionally." The experience also affected her personal development: "This project taught me a lot about myself. It helped me build confidence, improve my communication skills, and develop a more collaborative approach."

In addition to the student-staff partnership, Regina's work within the faculty WP initiative represents another crucial aspect of her positionality. She noted: "Working within the WP initiative helped me understand the broader goals of the institution and how our project supported those goals." This aspect of Regina's positionality focused on her role within the institutional structure and her contributions to broader WP goals.

Openness

Openness involves asking questions about the purpose, goals, vision, and desires that partners have for the partnership (Smith, et al, 2019). By being open to the partnership process, we could work closely together as a collaborative team of four with a shared vision. This meant that Regina's imagined goals of peer mentorship were exceeded: "I was not expecting to find a community that was not only supportive but taught me so many new skills. . . . [It] definitely improved my confidence." Regina was aware of and open to the many forms of partnership and valued the opportunity to make a difference to her peers, and she indicated that this gave her both personal and professional satisfaction: "Even though I applied and it was an official role, it was still nice to spend time with students that were in the same position as me and to be able to give them advice and guide them." She argued that the support of academics was integral to her ability to navigate the challenges of partnership with students as an intern: "The support of academics meant that it felt like a community," she said.

Embracing the process of partnership enables individual and collective growth. Regina reflected on her professional development, noting significant improvements in various skills: "The experience enhanced my project management abilities, honed my communication skills, and taught me the importance of flexibility in problem-solving." She also gained valuable

leadership experience: "Leading workshops and coordinating with different departments helped me develop strong leadership qualities that I will carry forward in my career."

Regina's reflections highlight the profound impact of the partnership on her professional development. For example, she shared how other interns could benefit from a similar partnership: "My biggest piece of advice would be to have an open mind to anything that's thrown at you [and] take every piece of advice into account not only for the present but for the future because it will definitely make a big impact." Her journey through the partnership process showcases the importance of openness in fostering professional growth and achieving personal satisfaction.

Willingness

Willingness relates to the willingness to invest time in the process (Smith, et al, 2019). At the start of the project, Regina had not fully anticipated the extent to which partnership was a priority for her or the impact this would have on her own personal development. She reflected: "I had no idea what direction this would take me, but I feel I know so much more positive about myself . . . . [There is] less questioning of myself." Moreover, she commented that she learned that it is important to take time to build relationships essential to the process: "[I] put myself in their shoes [and had to] consider what would work better for someone else."

Themes of freedom and flexibility frequently came up during the interview. For example, Regina said, "I had the freedom of basically doing anything I thought [would] work," which helped her to value new and different ways of working. She shared that "the opportunity to do things like PowerPoint designing, making videos. . . . [was] amazing opportunity to venture into designing [that] opened up how I could react to certain things."

Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism can take the form of partners making assumptions about each other based on labels such as student or staff member (Smith, et al, 2019). Regina initially struggled to fit in a Northumbria University and spoke about wanting to give something back to support fellow peers facing similar barriers and challenges: "I was coming from a completely different background. I think integrating into a new community has been difficult for me." Being part of this project enabled Regina to give something back to her peers while she "learned about working with different people from different backgrounds." Our partnership approach meant that Regina was able to consider different ways of approaching the same problem or issue, which is apparent in her reflection on the project's impact on her: "It has guided me in ways I didn't even know I can go into."

We were careful to take the stance that there is no right or wrong answer, highlighting our definition of partnership. In doing so, Regina felt increasingly empowered to share her thoughts more openly and deeply—which she described as "being able to communicate any problems [and] voice issues I [felt] myself"—and to think about her developing self throughout the process. Regina developed a sense of belonging and felt valued for her contributions:

> I don't think there was ever a time I thought I'd get into trouble for doing this . . . or that I couldn't speak up about what I felt was wrong or if I felt I needed support or guidance to help.

She also developed by thinking differently and becoming more professional: "I am more creative because of this experience and think more practically."

Reflexivity

Reflexivity involves the ability to recognise how individuals are shaped by and can shape their environment and how the self and other exist in relationships (Smith, et al, 2019). Regarding the overall project, we identified themes around creativity, feeling empowered, and enjoyment from the interview transcript. Regina found the process "eye opening," enabling her to recognise the skills she had as well as building on them, which is demonstrated by the following comment: "at the beginning my confidence was not really there as much yet. . . I don't think I was communicating to the level where I am now. . . these skills were improved immensely. Other skills improved included my presentation skills which were lacking . . . and definitely teamwork."

Regina also developed professional skills, including leadership and project management skills, which enabled her to consider further academic avenues as part of her future aspirations. Regina is currently studying for a project management postgraduate degree, and she commented, "I wasn't too sure where I was going. . . . This opportunity did open up looking at project management and working in the university." Regina reflected that our partnership approach, built on openness and support, was central to her academic and professional development, and explained that the partnership "never put any pressure on me." Feedback was important in helping Regina to think differently about her own learning: "feedback I received from everyone was extremely helpful. . . . [It] taught me to look at life more creatively." She also recognized that it helped Regina to grow in confidence: "I definitely don't think I was as outgoing. . . . [I] didn't expect to find myself to be as confident and empowered."

Regina reflected that our partnership approach, built on openness and support, was central to her academic and professional development. She emphasized that the non-hierarchical and supportive nature of the partnership allowed her to grow without feeling pressured: "never put any pressure on me." This lack of coercion fostered a safe and encouraging environment, enabling her to take risks and explore new ideas freely.

Whilst there was no feeling of competition for leadership in the partnership, the collaboration was also responsive—Regina never felt there was a lack of structure or guidance. The collaborative and pressure-free atmosphere allowed Regina to develop her skills and confidence, highlighting the importance of reflexivity in personal and professional growth.

DISCUSSION

The P.O.W.E.R framework enabled us to reflect on areas of power within the project and identify what worked well and any challenges faced. The project had a transformative effect on Regina. By disrupting existing power dynamics, this approach empowered Regina to actively engage in the negotiation of ideas, co-creation of learning experiences, and sharing of responsibilities and challenges. This collaborative environment fostered a sense of shared ownership and collective problem-solving, which, as highlighted by Moore-Cherry et al. (2016), promotes a more inclusive and participatory learning environment. Regina's main challenge

was striking a balance in her communication with the mentors as a peer and project lead. Interns can become frustrated when their peers do not make use of their advice, do not respond to contact, or fail to make meetings (Bellon-Harn & Weinbaum, 2017).

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Staff-student partnerships are an opportunity to develop an inclusive institutional environment. Using the P.O.W.E.R framework can enable teams to nurture power-sharing relationships through dialogue and reflection. The alignment between partnership working and developing and delivering peer mentoring programs is highly advantageous (Hayman et al., 2022). When students assume the role of mentors, they are presented with a valuable opportunity to engage in collaborative and interactive work with fellow students and academic staff that supports personal and professional development.

Through our experience with the framework, we have gained valuable insights. One key lesson learned is the importance of recognising and acknowledging our own and others' perspectives in building successful partnerships. Openness plays a central role in fostering effective partnerships, and it is difficult to collaborate without being open to new ideas and perspectives. Additionally, the willingness to invest time in a partnership ensures the sustainability of the partnership. As HE often prioritises Western knowledge and ways of knowing, it is essential to reflect on and challenge ethnocentrism.

CONCLUSION

Our collaborative approach enabled us to foster an environment of active participation to ensure that the peer mentoring program was well designed, effectively delivered, and supportive of positive outcomes for all participants and partners. Regina provided a valuable contribution to designing the program, delivering its content, and actively participating as a co-researcher. Her interview reflections using the P.O.W.E.R framework have provided a deeper understanding of the peer mentor experience, highlighting aspects that she found challenging and enjoyable. We believe that working closely with a student intern as an equal partner has offered unique insights that have greatly enriched the program and contributed to its overall success.

The submitted work received ethical approval from the Northumbria University Ethics Committee. There are no real or perceived conflicts of interest.

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