CASE STUDY

Embracing the "third space" in higher education: A case for embedded students-as-partners teaching and learning

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a case for integrating students as partners (SaP) within the curriculum of higher education (HE), particularly through the lens of "third space" learning. Drawing on our experiences as a collaborative of educators in Canada and the United Kingdom, we explore the liberatory potential of play, partnership, and co-creation in HE. Through the *Becoming an Educationist* (Becoming) module, we demonstrate how SaP can empower students—especially non-traditional students in UK post-1992 universities, that is, UK institutions with a strong focus on widening participation, applied learning, and "social mobility" or transformative learning—to find their voice in academia. We argue for embedding SaP within the curriculum to foster a sustainable ecology of collaborative practice for social justice, challenging traditional divisive structures in education.

KEYWORDS

students as partners (SaP), higher education, third space learning, co-creation and play, social justice, collaborative practice

The increasingly individualistic and competitive nature of contemporary society (Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, 2021) has seeped into higher education (HE), sidelining collaborative spaces for students and lecturers alike. In response to this, we argue for the integration of playful "third space" opportunities within the curriculum—spaces where boundaries are malleable (Webster, 2018) and students and lecturers can collaboratively co-construct knowledge and challenge entrenched academic hierarchies.

Students-as-partners (SaP) initiatives, although now widely acknowledged and promoted, are still typically extracurricular, operating on the fringes of the classroom (Myhre et al., 2022). They are also often organized top-down (Mercer-Mapstone & Abbot, 2019). However, if SaP initiatives are embedded within the curriculum, they can foster an academic environment where partnership is not just a metric, or an opportunity offered to a privileged few, but a value that is enacted (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2019). Our *Becoming* module demonstrates how these partnerships can be positively transformative when integrated into the formal structure of accredited programmes and appropriately supported.

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BECOMING AN EDUCATIONIST

Our *Becoming an Educationist* (*Becoming*) module, offered to 1st-year undergraduate education students at London Metropolitan University, a widening participation, inner-city London higher education institution, leverages playful and creative co-creation to allow non-traditional students to find their academic voice (Sinfield et al., 2019). By knitting, dancing, singing, and exploring liberatory practices together, students and lecturers engage in a partnership that nurtures identity formation and authentic learning.

In the module, students make meaning through collage work, role play, discussion, collaborative reading, "writing to learn," blogging, co-producing multimodal artefacts, and the running of exhibitions, showcases, and conferences. Through this process, they are encouraged to take on leadership roles, "taking over" sections of the module to teach, conduct research into educational spaces, and scaffold the learning of others by running public-facing events. This creative, collaborative inquiry is a catalyst for student curiosity and agency. The students themselves are driving the teaching and learning process, in collaboration with each other and us, their lecturers.

This playful, participatory approach also challenges hierarchical teacher-student dynamics, fostering a shared learning experience that values lived experience and multiple ways of knowing. By embedding SaP within the curriculum, the module cultivates a sustainable culture of collaboration, critical engagement, and social justice—equipping students with the confidence and agency to navigate and reshape academia.

CO-CREATION AND PLAY AS ACADEMIC PRAXIS

The approach to teaching, learning, and assessment taken in *Becoming* aligns with the concept of third space as described by Bhabha (2004), Webster (2018), and Gutiérrez (2008), where traditional academic roles are flexible and the space adapts to meet the needs of all participants. As such, *Becoming*, serves as a third space for students who usually feel excluded from traditional academic discourse—those historically marginalized, questioning their place in HE, or struggling to see themselves reflected in dominant academic narratives.

In this space, students and lecturers engage in a dynamic partnership where both shape the learning experience (Thorpe & Partridge, 2024). Lecturers design and facilitate activities—such as playful learning activities, collaborative inquiries, and public showcases—that encourage students to express themselves, engage with each other, and celebrate their learning. Meanwhile, students bring their own lived experiences, perspectives, and creative expressions, actively co-constructing knowledge rather than passively receiving it.

This reflects the Freirean ideal of education as a liberatory process, where learning emerges through dialogue and shared meaning-making (Freire, 2018). It also aligns with Nancy's (2000) concept of "being with," emphasizing that students and educators alike develop their academic identities and knowledge in relation to one another. Through this reciprocal exchange, *Becoming* fosters a sustainable, inclusive learning community where diverse voices are heard, valued, and empowered.

PLAY AS A MODE AND MEANS TO FOSTER CONNECTION

The creative and collaborative approach taken in *Becoming* is not a repudiation of academic rigour; rather it embraces connection and play as "serious business" (Parr, 2014, n.p.), with transformational potential. By integrating partnership and play into learning, our "sidelined" students are welcomed in academia as their full, authentic selves. This is reparative practice as their backgrounds and experiences are not only acknowledged but actively valued as integral to the learning process. They are encouraged to playfully connect with their own heritage and knowledge while engaging in meaningful exchange with their peers and lecturers—and the module content.

For example, in their first weeks of *Becoming*, students are invited to undertake real qualitative research, based on their own experiences as new students. The outcomes are always remarkable—not only do they engage in authentic research, but they also harness their own strengths through collaboration with their peers and lecturers. In doing so, they do not just learn about research as a key concept, such as what research is and how it is conducted, but practise nuanced academic skills such as inquiring, connecting, and presenting. Most importantly, this experience fosters confidence and pride in their work. Especially because their findings are not confined to traditional research reports, they are able to showcase their inquires in a creative mid-term exhibition of field study findings (Burns et al., 2018). This playful public dissemination reinforces their academic identities, demonstrating that their voices and perspectives matter within the university space (Burns et al., 2019).

Whereas traditional academia often isolates and positions students in competition against one other—and their lecturers—reinforcing a deficit narrative (Reay et al., 2009), our approach fosters connection, collaboration, and mutual recognition of strengths. Rather than focusing on what students lack, we celebrate who they are and what they can do. In this sense, partnership is more than just a pedagogical strategy; it is a shared act of growth, for both students and lecturers (Abegglen et al., 2021b; Whitchurch, 2008). As students and lecturers come together, they form a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) that blurs traditional academic hierarchies. This creates a space where students, staff, and external partners can co-create meaningful, liberatory educational experiences—challenging power dynamics and reimagining higher education as a site of shared learning and transformation.

SEEDING AN ECOLOGY OF COLLABORATIVE PRACTICE

Drawing on our experience as well as formal and informal student feedback, we argue that while SaP projects outside of programmes are valuable, embedding SaP within the curriculum itself is more effective. Students need structured opportunities to collaborate with peers, lecturers, and external partners as part of their core program, with dedicated time and space to engage in partnership work. They should also receive academic credit for their effort. This can only happen if SaP projects are truly embedded within programs and the university itself.

From an ethical and social justice perspective, partnership projects should therefore not be exclusive but integrated as part of a sustainable ecology of practice that prioritises co-creation throughout students' academic journeys (Abegglen et al., 2024). When students are invited to engage in collaborative work as a formal part of their learning experience, the outcomes—as

demonstrated by our formal and informal module evaluations—are transformative. For further insights, see *The Social Hand Grenade* blog by Dan Jordan, one of our students, and refer to the Appendix for one of his posts, which is a meta reflection on the module as a whole.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A MORE COLLABORATIVE AND JUST ACADEMIA

We argue that the *Becoming an Educationist* module can serve as a model for integrating SaP within the curriculum, because it created a third space for inclusive, collaborative learning through play. By embedding partnership learning within the formal structure of our program, we challenged the exclusionary and individualistic tendencies that dominate academia today. Thus, precisely because of their power and value, SaP initiatives should not be confined to isolated projects but should be woven into the fabric of HE. In a world of increasing uncertainty, fostering these collaborative relationships within the curriculum is essential for preparing students to navigate complex, real-world challenges with confidence, creativity, and a sense of agency.

As educators, it is our responsibility to create third spaces for collective learning, enabling students to become not just academics but active, engaged participants in an uncertain world.

CODA

In both Canada and the United Kingdom, where we, the authors are situated, as elsewhere in the world, there is a pressing need to foster equity in HE and in society. We argue that our SaP approach offers a pathway to not only democratise contested academic spaces, but also to provide students and lecturers with the tools to challenge individualistic and exclusionary societal practices. By creating spaces for collaboration and mutual respect, we can help students, especially those from marginalised backgrounds, find their voice within larger narratives. This is crucial for fostering a more humane and connected world where the individual and collective matters and where authentic learning can occur.

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APPENDIX

Student reflection: To what extent has the module *Becoming an Educationalist* prepared you for the reality of becoming an educationalist? (Dan Jordan's final, unedited blogpost)

Becoming has been the most unique and creative module within the education studies course at the London Metropolitan. Its content has been all encompassing and has helped me greatly in other modules; yet, the real lesson has been the way in which the content has been delivered; the module is democratic and relies heavily on the dialogic. It lets us express ourselves honestly and freely, and asks that we allow others to do the same. *Becoming* has made me question why we as people (rather than just students) do or think certain things, and makes us ask if there isn't

another way; after all, "learning is about gathering new ideas and information" (Burns & Sinfield, 2016, p. 52). I will be showing how these traits, amongst others, have helped prepare me for becoming an educationalist and will be drawing on examples of activities that I have partaken in during the module. This will include simulations and role play, multimodal exhibitions, and blogging.

One of our initial lessons in the *Becoming* module revolved around a scenario where there had been a nuclear war which had completely destroyed the planet. We then had to choose from 10 varying survivors and argue our case for each one so that they may get a place in a bunker which was only able to sustain three people. This simulated activity involved role play as we each took on a different character and had to convince the others that we were worthy enough to be saved. The benefit of role play is that it promotes students into transitioning from "passive to active learners" (Paquette, 2012, n.p.). I enjoyed this activity as the scenario itself was completely different to my expectations of this module. While at first I couldn't see the reasoning behind the activity, as it drew to a close it became much clearer. As a class we discussed who we would keep in and why, and through this dialogic we viewed the same briefly described characters through the eyes of our classmates, who all imagined their worth in very different ways.

This was my first introduction to the theories of NeoKantianism and Utilitarianism, as well as a refresher on common sense. It seems a great educationalist must at times play devil's advocate while not maybe agreeing and always trying to understand opposing ideas, as well as utilising a sense of empathy to try and see something you take for granted in a different way. We ended the lecture by being given varying statements on education and were then put into three groups to do triadic reflection. This is where two people discussed their thoughts or feelings on an opinion, while the third person observed. At the end it was up to the triad to add anything that they felt could be expanded upon, or to include something that had been missed completely. This was a natural progression from our earlier activity and cemented the ideas of understanding contrary theories and ideologies, as well as helping us realise the importance and potential of a democratic dialogic.

During another lesson we were asked to explore the university campus as participant observers and to discover its formal and informal learning spaces. We were told to choose from a different range of mediums and then to present our work to the class. As a group we chose to make a short film detailing our exploration of the building and its people. Sir Ken Robinson's Ted Talk, "Do Schools Kill Creativity" (Robinson, 2006), was a great influence on this project, both in terms of our decision to make a video, and in helping us consider informal learning spaces and the limitations of traditional classroom learning. We walked around the university and filmed ourselves and others interacting with both the building and each other. This activity was an opportunity for us to showcase ourselves as much as the work itself, and in a nonconventional, more creative way. It was also our first opportunity to work in a group outside of class and a good means of preparation for the activities to come.

Filming and producing the video was relatively easy compared to the idea of showing it to the class. However, we as a group were very proud of our video, and the positive feedback we received was the most rewarding aspect of our presentation and was fantastic for the self efficacy of all those who were involved. The idea of the exploration, specifically the formal and informal aspect of it, showed us all that learning cannot be restricted by a curriculum or

contained to a classroom. Learning takes many forms, and therefore can flourish in many different environments (Thornburg, 2007). Learning is like breathing; we are all doing it all the time and very often without even realising. As an educationalist it is vital to remember this, and also to realise that not all education is taught or learnt consciously, but rather obtained just by being with people in a meaningful setting (Illich, 1971).

The longest running activity we took part in during the *Becoming* module was blogging. We were each asked at the beginning of the academic year to write a weekly blog detailing what we had done in each lesson and what we thought about it, along with any new terminology or concepts that we should learn or investigate. Chloe's blog (*NOBLECHLOE*, n.d.) was a great inspiration for me when it came to figuring out how to write my blog, as it showed me how important your own voice can be. Writing the blog was great practice for when it comes to writing finals essays, though it was much less daunting as we were told that we should write in our own voice rather than attempting to make the blogs sound academic. This runs a lot deeper than just using our own vocabulary or vernacular; the blog was a chance to discover theories and practices and to write about not just our understanding, but how we felt about them and in what way we found them relevant to us, as well as to others through reading their own blogs, and in turn discovering their thoughts, feelings, and opinions.

Many of our lessons presented us with more questions than they did answers. With so many theorists, ideologies, ideas, and educational terminology being thrown around it would've been impossible to find all the answers in one lesson. Keeping detailed notes for a blog not only recorded answers, but also presented us with questions to answer ourselves. Blogging opened up doors of online connectivity and heutagogy. Blogging for ourselves and interacting with the blogs of our classmates prepared us to acknowledge and accept that everyone experiences the same things in greatly differing ways, and to respect the views and opinions of others, as well as learn from them.

In conclusion, my experience of *Becoming* is that it is a module of contradictions; it isn't trying to teach us a particular curriculum or an agreed ideology of education, but is instead trying to get us to learn about as many contrary and conflicting ideologies and theories as possible, and to then question that which we already believe we know and take for granted. An educationalist shouldn't teach as much as inspire others to want to learn themselves, and this has been the core value of the module—not teaching, but inspiring self efficacy and heutagogy in those who attend the lessons. This is the sort of educationalist I wish to become. Not one who teaches what a government body feels needs to be taught for society, but to help people discover and learn about what they love.

An educationalist shouldn't teach a curriculum, but teach a love of learning, and in doing so should learn alongside their students, not showing them a path to take but helping them make their own trails. *Becoming* is a module that leans heavily on new communication and social media technologies, and is therefore not confined to the classroom, or to a specific date or time. The module, much like education itself, occurs anywhere and at any time, whether it be through group work out of hours, reading a relevant link or article, or sharing something of interest with our classmates. *Becoming* is a module that has become indispensable in all aspects of our studies. *Becoming* expects us to look at the infra-ordinary and ask questions about why something is a certain way.

Becoming an Educationalist has shown me that education isn't about making people understand a particular type of content as much as it is about understanding a person themself. Each person has very different cultural, social, and economic capital, and therefore will approach and understand the same content in very different ways. It is our job as future educationalists to help nurture people's talents and interests and to shape a society around individuals rather than moulding individuals into useful members of society. We are not able to realistically predict what the world will look like in 10 years, so why educate people to function in a world that doesn't exist anymore when we can instead educate them to make something of the world, as "until man has made something of himself he could make little of the world around him" (Mumford, 1984).

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