

REFLECTIVE ESSAY

Creation and nurturing of staff-student partnerships: Unspoken challenges

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Over the past several years, through our respective and overlapping engagements, we have both engaged deeply to create and sustain staff-student partnerships (SSPs) and students as partners (SaP) across diverse institutional and cultural contexts. In our experience, partnership work is not only pedagogically innovative but also emotionally demanding, politically fraught, and structurally complex. It disrupts traditional power dynamics, prompting a rethinking of roles, responsibilities, and relational norms (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). At the same time, it exposes persistent tensions between transformative aspirations and institutional realities. Along the way, the two of us have faced institutional resistance, a lack of supportive structures, and the often-unseen emotional labor required to create spaces for authentic collaboration. We have also grappled with uneven conceptual clarity about what partnership means in practice, and with how differently institutions signal their commitment to this work. The process has been layered and unpredictable, marked by uncertainty, tension, and a deep sense of responsibility. Yet, it has also been profoundly transformative.

Working across Australia and the United States at vastly different institutions, we discovered shared challenges and similar doubts despite our contrasting contexts. Across these settings, four interconnected themes consistently surfaced: the struggle for conceptual clarity, the necessity of embracing uncertainty as pedagogical opportunity, the invisible emotional labor underpinning partnership, and institutional resistance to fundamental change. This reflection emerged from our conversations, which at times were cathartic, unsettling, and often illuminating. We came to realize that sharing our experiences publicly felt necessary, not only to share what often remains unspoken, but also to stand in solidarity with others doing similar work. We offer this essay as a reflective companion for educators and students. Rather than prescribing solutions, we share a personal and critical account of the often-unspoken challenges in SSP/SaP work, inviting the SoTL community to engage honestly with the complexity and messiness inherent in genuinely collaborative education.

REFLECTIONS

Our reflections are shaped by four guiding provocations grounded in experience, dialogue, and discomfort. These provocations frame the tensions, uncertainties, values, and commitments that continue to inform our practice:

1. *Conceptual clarity and institutional contexts*

How can we meaningfully articulate, enact, and sustain partnership principles across diverse institutional settings, from the absence of support to performative implementation?

2. *Embracing uncertainty*

How might we reframe the uncertainty in partnership work as a space for innovation, reflexivity, and growth rather than a barrier?

3. *Emotional labor*

How can institutions better recognize, value, and support the often-invisible emotional labor that underpins authentic partnership?

4. *Resistance to fundamental change*

How can we foster and sustain transformative partnerships within systems structured to resist fundamental change?

We offer these provocations as an invitation to the SoTL community to sit with the messiness, nuance, and complexity of partnership. We believe that only through collective reflection and honest dialogue can the transformative potential of SaP be fully realized.

Thread #1: Conceptual clarity and institutional contexts

This thread begins with a foundational tension: partnership cannot be enacted meaningfully without conceptual clarity, yet institutions often blur, dilute, or constrain what partnership is meant to be. When clarity is absent, or when commitment is merely rhetorical, partnership becomes precarious, uneven, and vulnerable to misinterpretation. Drawing on our experiences across contrasting institutional contexts, we explore how ambiguity, performative endorsement, and structural fragility shape the lived practice of Students as Partners.

Despite working in universities that differ significantly in size, structure, and focus—one large and research-intensive, the other small and teaching-focused—we were struck by the shared realities of our experiences. In both settings, partnership work was not institutionally embedded but emerged from personal conviction, informal networks, and persistent advocacy. Our engagement in SSP/SaP was driven by a shared pedagogical commitment to inclusion, co-creation, and student voice, which motivated us to pursue partnership approaches even in the absence of formal institutional structures. Neither institution had a dedicated center to facilitate partnership pedagogy, nor a sustained, university-wide commitment to SSP/SaP as a pedagogical approach. Nonetheless, both of us were encouraged when we wanted to initiate conversations about partnership pedagogy and received individual or administrative support for such efforts. Yet, these initiatives remain distinct from having a dedicated teaching and learning center that systematically supports and sustains partnership practice.

We experimented with different models: faculty-wide dialogues, co-created syllabi, collaborative assessments, student-led course design, and joint research projects. But without formal structures, funding, or workload recognition, these efforts were often fragmented and precarious, sustained largely by personal passion and commitment in both our contexts. Our collaboration began when we were both involved in assessing a Students as Partners initiative,

where our conversations revealed a shared curiosity, deep passion, and occasional frustration with how partnership practices are enacted and valued. From these resonances, a reflective dialogue emerged, grounded in mutual recognition and a desire to understand. Together, we began to ask: What does meaningful partnership look like in this place, with these people, under these constraints? It is from this question that our reflections take shape.

Partnership implementation varies widely: institutions with no formal commitment, and those where commitment is largely performative. We have experienced both extremes, where partnership was absent, and where it was visibly championed but rarely realized meaningfully. These contrasts led us to reflect on how conceptual clarity or its absence shapes the lived experience of partnership.

In institutions without explicit programs or frameworks, educators face unique challenges in initiating partnership work. Without structural support, dedicated resources, and a lack of recognition of SSP/SaP as part of institutional culture, staff often begin this work independently and in isolation. We found ourselves advocating for a partnership, drawing on influential roadmaps from scholars such as Cook-Sather et al. (2014), Healey et al. (2014), and Bovill (2020), alongside our own instincts, shared values, and belief in collaboration. Yet translating these ideas into practice was shaped by our positionalities within our institutions. Without formal recognition or structural support, our efforts to embed partnership remained fragile and often unsustainable, highlighting how advocacy for transformative pedagogies is deeply contingent on one's place and power within the system.

These staff-led efforts, while commendable, often lack the infrastructure necessary for sustainability. Without administrative support, funding mechanisms, or guidance from teaching and learning centers, partnerships remain fragile and dependent on individual passion and commitment. We saw well-intentioned initiatives stall because they relied too heavily on a single staff member's labor and vision. That kind of dependency made our work unsustainable and isolating. Partnering with students in such contexts meant we were simultaneously defining, enacting, and defending partnership principles, often without models, peer networks, or institutional validation. For instance, in student-staff collaborations on curriculum redesign and assessment co-creation, we encountered unresolved questions that exposed the limits of institutional support: Who decides how to compensate student partners? What happens when commitments are not fulfilled? Can faculty ethically *grade* or *penalize* a student partner? In the absence of formal structures or shared frameworks, such decisions fell solely to faculty discretion, ironically undermining the very equity and reciprocity that partnership seeks to cultivate. Our invitations to co-create were sometimes misunderstood. Students occasionally interpreted these efforts as us asking for help rather than as a pedagogical shift. These moments were unsettling but revealing. What we saw as radical pedagogy was sometimes perceived as a lack of direction. It exposed how deeply hierarchical norms shape expectations in higher education. We were inviting students into a space that the institution itself had not endorsed, and they could feel that dissonance.

Without institutional support, we were not only building partnerships from scratch but also navigating deeply embedded hierarchies around age, professionalism, and authority. This introduced both practical and conceptual uncertainties: blurred roles, ambiguous expectations, and unclear success metrics. We often found ourselves improvising, explaining to students what

we meant by *partnership*, while still figuring it out ourselves. In this process, we confronted one of the deepest tensions: how to challenge hierarchies while operating within them.

At the other extreme are institutions that commit to SSP/SaP rhetorically but implement them superficially. Here, partnership language becomes part of institutional branding and addresses accountability metrics without deep philosophical engagement. We have worked in such places and under such leadership, where the word ‘partnership’ appears in reports and mission statements. Yet, in reality, little appetite exists for the messiness and risk that genuine partnership demands.

Our observations reinforce the idea that these institutions often treat SSP/SaP as checkbox exercises to satisfy compliance requirements rather than as a transformative pedagogy. This creates a gap between narrative and reality. Such superficial efforts focus on visibility rather than shifting power, building trust, or enabling long-term co-creation. We have felt the quiet frustration of seeing partnership reduced to ‘engagement opportunities’—impressive on paper, lacking depth in practice. At times, we found ourselves complicit, presenting success stories to leadership while privately mourning the erosion of core values.

We have also felt the responsibility to protect students from disillusionment when their enthusiasm met institutional indifference. Both staff and students have been constrained by superficial mandates. When SSP/SaP is approached as compliance, it generates frustration. Students perceive that initiatives are *done to* them, not *with them*. We, as educators, have found our efforts to engage students in co-creation undermined by institutional pressures or expectations that contradict partnership principles.

Similarly, students felt patronized when invited to participate but not truly valued—without agency and recognition. We saw students withdraw, disheartened by a promised agency that turned into performative. A student once expressed that it felt like they were there to endorse decisions, not shape them—an insight starkly revealed the dissonance between rhetoric and reality. It reminded us how high the emotional stakes can be—for students, and for us. These tensions underscore a central challenge: surface-level commitment without critical engagement can ultimately do more harm than good.

Both scenarios—the absence of institutional commitment and the presence of performative implementation—point to a deeper issue: a lack of conceptual clarity about what meaningful partnership involves. Scholars like Healey et al. (2014), Cook-Sather et al. (2014), and Matthews et al. (2018) argue that without shared understanding and supportive systems, partnership risks becoming a hollow exercise that reproduces existing power structures. This conceptual gap prompts critical questions: How do we challenge traditional hierarchies when our efforts are shaped by the very systems we hope to transform? And how do we stay committed to inclusive, dialogic pedagogy when institutional norms favor control, efficiency, and predictability?

Across institutional contexts, we have learned that authentic and sustainable partnerships require more than enthusiasm or policy statements. They demand clarity of purpose, a culture of trust, and an institutional willingness to reimagine teaching and learning. We are still learning how to do this. But we have also learned that meaningful partnership requires courage, not only from students but from us. The courage to advocate when support is thin, to remain relational in systems that reward detachment, and to hold onto hope when fatigue sets in.

When we center trust, embrace vulnerability, and stay open to discomfort, things begin to shift slowly, imperfectly, but meaningfully. Without these, partnership risks becoming a performance rather than a transformation, and the true potential of co-created learning remains unrealized.

Thread #2: Embracing uncertainty as pedagogical opportunity

Thread 2 shifts from the question of clarity to a related challenge: embracing uncertainty as a pedagogical strength rather than a weakness. While conceptual grounding matters, Students as Partners work requires a willingness to inhabit open-endedness, accepting that not all outcomes can be predetermined or processes neatly contained. This thread examines how we distinguish between productive uncertainty emerging from co-creation and the destabilizing uncertainty produced by institutional ambiguity, and what it means to hold space for one while navigating the other.

While the need for conceptual clarity is evident, we have also found that SSP/SaP pedagogies embrace the inherent uncertainty and open-endedness of education. When implemented effectively, they benefit students (agency, critical thinking, belonging), faculty (renewed energy, fresh perspectives, deeper connections), and institutions (engaged learners, responsive curricula). Without such partnerships, education risks hierarchy, compliance, and passive learning rather than collaboration and creativity. Uneven institutional responses—from hesitant incorporation to cautious experimentation—reflect an underlying tension with this pedagogical uncertainty. We have learned to distinguish between productive uncertainty from genuine collaboration and destructive uncertainty from institutional ambiguity. Holding space for the former while navigating the latter is one of the most challenging aspects of our practice.

In our own experiences, we encountered a shared tension: the expectation to predetermine outcomes and articulate clear objectives before partnerships even took shape. At first, we found ourselves conforming to these expectations, believing that clarity and structure were necessary for legitimacy. But as our work evolved, we began to see how pre-emptive framing could limit rather than support the partnership. It risked closing off possibilities, stifling creativity, and restricting student agency.

Uncertainty, or what Bovill (2020) calls the open-endedness of teaching and learning, is a fundamental characteristic of partnership-based pedagogy. We came to see it not as a flaw to be managed, but as a feature to be embraced. It is not just an operational challenge, but an opportunity to transform educational practice. While traditional models prioritize predetermined outcomes, metrics, and hierarchies, true partnership embraces unpredictability, creating space for genuine co-creation and discovery where neither students nor staff can fully anticipate the learning journey.

Yet this openness often clashes with the rigid expectations of higher education. Universities require detailed syllabi treated as contracts, emphasize predetermined outcomes, and reward pedagogies aligned with efficiency. In this context, partnership work can seem incompatible, even risky. When we introduced these approaches in our classrooms, students often responded with confusion, questioning our clarity and structure. Their reactions reflected educational norms where co-creation was misinterpreted as a lack of competence. Still, when embraced, uncertainty created space for collaboration and surprise. It demanded we step outside our comfort zones and challenged the idea that good teaching must follow a fixed path.

The transformative potential of uncertainty surfaced in powerful, often unexpected ways. It enabled spontaneous shifts in goals, student-led pivots, and insights that deepened learning for all. We experienced this when plans gave way to something more generative, where letting go of control did not result in chaos but in richer outcomes. These moments were humbling and rewarding. Yet without formal structures, we often had to persuade stakeholders of the value of our approaches, leaning heavily on scholarship and research-informed practice to justify our methods. Still, we found ourselves treading carefully, navigating concerns about workload, teaching effectiveness, student satisfaction, and potential negative evaluations. In such cases, we were not just defending a pedagogy; we were continually legitimizing it within institutional norms.

The challenge for educators and institutions is to balance conceptual clarity with the generative openness at the heart of genuine partnership. We have wrestled with this balance constantly: How much structure is too much? At what point does guidance start to constrain student agency? These are not questions with simple answers, but ones we continue to ask. They urge us to reimagine not just our practice, but our assumptions about authority, curriculum design, and what it means to teach and learn well.

Thread #3: Emotional labor: The overlooked burden of facilitating partnerships

Thread 3 confronts a dimension of partnership that is rarely named but always present: emotional labor. Sustaining Students as Partners work demands far more than intellectual engagement; it requires ongoing relational effort, including building trust, absorbing uncertainty, holding discomfort, and caring for students and colleagues alike. Though foundational to meaningful collaboration, this labor remains largely invisible within institutional structures, creating a profound gap between what partnership requires and what institutions formally recognize.

We have realized that in the SSP/SaP landscape, emotional labor emerges as one of the most profound yet least acknowledged challenges. Beyond logistics and intellectual engagement, we often find ourselves carrying the weight of fostering an environment where students can grow, grapple with frustrations, and embark on journeys of self-discovery. This work is inherently relational. It draws on our capacity for empathy, vulnerability, and care, which are central to authentic collaboration and remain largely invisible within institutional systems.

Facilitating SSP/SaP involves a delicate balancing act needing both theoretical understanding and emotional investment. There is no manual for how to support a student questioning their sense of belonging, or how to hold space for discomfort when hierarchies are challenged in the classroom. We have had to learn, often through trial and error, how to create and sustain spaces of trust, where students and staff can be honest about their uncertainties, name tensions openly, and reimagine what teaching and learning could look like.

As Matthews (2017) notes, partnership work requires educators to develop comfort with vulnerability and uncertainty while simultaneously providing emotional scaffolding for students experiencing similar discomfort. In practice, this has meant absorbing a range of emotions such as confusion, resistance, excitement, and anxiety, not only in our students but in ourselves. We felt the pressure to remain composed, while inside, we were also navigating doubt or disappointment, often alone.

Despite being central to the success of partnership initiatives, emotional labor remains largely unacknowledged in institutional terms. We invest significant emotional energy with little formal recognition, as this labor is seen as extra rather than essential. In our contexts, formal recognition could include grants or workload reductions for faculty/staff, and monetary, course, or internship credit for students, tailored to each school and program through ongoing dialogue among administration, faculty, and students. Yet such structures and conversations are largely absent. As Felten (2017) observes, this labor frequently falls outside formal workload expectations, creating dissonance between what we value and what is institutionally rewarded. We have often found ourselves asking: when care is so essential to this work, why is it treated as invisible?

This is where the toll becomes most visible. We have, at times, felt depleted—giving so much to uphold the ethos of partnership while grappling with the constraints of rigid institutional structures. Similarly, when partnership is not part of institutional culture, we had to enact it in isolation and without any compensation or validation. We were frequently directed to request financial support (both for our work and the work/time of student partners) from one university program or another.

A quiet exhaustion builds when emotional labor goes unspoken and unsupported. Yet we have often hesitated to mention, fearing it might undermine the sincerity of our efforts. Such experiences prompt critical questions: How can institutions better acknowledge and support the emotional labor embedded in SSP/SaP? And how can facilitators replenish their emotional energy without feeling the burden is solely theirs to carry?

This emotional labor is not equally distributed. Staff from historically marginalized groups, early-career academics, women, and those in precarious roles often carry disproportionate responsibilities with little recognition or support. As women of color in academia, both of us felt this inequity deeply. The expectation to be nurturing, endlessly available, and resilient in the face of institutional inertia often goes unquestioned. Our care is expected but rarely reciprocated. Our identities shape how our labor is perceived, and whether it is valued at all. Yet this labor is not without reward. Moments of breakthrough can be profoundly validating. Instances like when a student gains new insight, challenges a belief, or takes ownership of their learning remind us why we invest so deeply in partnerships, even as they expose the personal vulnerabilities involved. However, these transformative moments can only be sustained if institutions recognize and support the emotional dimensions of partnership. We need structures that not only recognize outcomes but also care for the people doing the work through formal recognition of emotional labor in workload models, communities of practice, and space to reflect, debrief, and recharge. We are still learning how to replenish ourselves, how to ask for what we need, and how to remain anchored in partnership values even when institutional winds blow hard in the opposite direction. For us, emotional labor is not simply a hidden cost of partnership; it is the very condition that makes trust, risk-taking, and transformation possible. Emotional labor is not incidental; it is foundational, and must be recognized and supported for partnership to be more than a hopeful idea.

What sustains us are moments of genuine connection: students recognizing our commitment and experiencing education as more than a transaction, and faculty/staff gaining mutual respect, renewed energy, and, occasionally, friendships that transcend hierarchies. These informal acknowledgments reveal the humanizing power of partnership.

Thread #4: Addressing the resistance to fundamental change

Thread 4 addresses a persistent obstacle that emerges when partnership calls for fundamental change. Rarely expressed as outright refusal, this resistance operates through inertia, bureaucratic caution, and the preservation of entrenched hierarchies. We explore how institutional cultures can absorb the language of partnership while resisting its implications, and how efforts to redistribute power are shaped by positionality, credibility, and risk.

Institutional resistance is a less visible but equally significant barrier to SSP/SaP initiatives. It often appears not as overt opposition, but as passive indifference or systemic inertia that quietly stifles change. In our experience, resistance has rarely come through closed doors or outright refusals, but through slow responses, shifting priorities, and the quiet sidelining of partnership values.

SSP/SaP pedagogy offers a transformative approach by challenging traditional hierarchies. By positioning students as co-creators of learning, research, and institutional practices, it reimagines education as a collaborative process, moving beyond top-down models of knowledge transmission (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). Instead, it fosters horizontal relationships where students are seen as equal participants (Matthews, 2017). The goal is an inclusive, equitable, dialogic educational ecosystem that honors everyone's agency (Felten et al., 2013).

Translating such a vision into reality has been harder than anticipated. We often found ourselves working against cultures shaped by tradition and entrenched ideas about who holds authority, whose voice matters, and what learning should look like. Resistance becomes most tangible in bureaucratic decisions, the casual devaluing of relational pedagogies, and performative nods to *student voice*.

The *messiness* of partnership often refers to the emotional, relational, and pedagogical uncertainties of shared control. In our work, this looked like prolonged planning conversations with no clear outcomes, students challenging our assumptions, or timelines that clashed with institutional demands. We felt exposed, accountable to both students and our institutions, yet unable to guarantee tidy outcomes. Such messiness, though generative, was difficult to justify in cultures driven by outputs and optics.

Higher education reflects broader societal hierarchies. We must push for change while avoiding burnout. In institutions shaped by these frameworks, key questions emerge: who holds the credible cultural capital to advocate for partnership? We were often told to 'just start,' and others would follow. But this advice overlooked positionality. Who gets to lead disruption and be seen as visionary? As women of color outside formal leadership, we found that recognition was not equally distributed.

Traditional roles of mentor and student remain deeply ingrained, with power structures defining relationships. Our experience shows partnership work can feel risky—especially for marginalized, early-career, or non-tenured staff. Identity intersects with power: proposing partnerships can be seen not as innovation but as disruption, particularly when it is voiced from the margins. Even at institutions with well-developed partnership programs, tensions persist between ideals and hierarchies. As profit-driven models and rigid structures dominate, this challenge extends beyond individual institutions to higher education more broadly. Partnership pedagogy inherently challenges power structures, often meeting resistance at multiple levels.

We built small-scale partnerships wherever we could—an advisory group or a pilot project here, a classroom initiative or one-on-one partnership there, spaces where students could shape

their learning. Through co-writing, check-ins, and open critique, we created shared-power spaces. These did not transform the institution, but formed a quiet counterculture of trust, reciprocity, and relational change.

REFLECTIONS ON SUSTAINING PARTNERSHIPS

Reflecting on our experiences, we confront a fundamental question: How do we keep advocating for transformation within systems designed to resist it? How can we build sustainable partnerships that challenge power while working inside those structures? This question sits at the heart of our practice—unresolved, sometimes painful, but always present. Yet, by asking and holding space for it, we continue to resist.

Addressing institutional resistance requires persistence and strategic alignment. Our experience shows the importance of linking SSP/SaP to institutional priorities and engaging leadership in a shared vision. Yet, systemic change is neither straightforward nor guaranteed. Genuine integration of student voice, agency, and inclusive pedagogy demands more than isolated efforts or performative acceptance. It requires comprehensive support, clear policies, and formal frameworks that embed SSP/SaP into the institutional ethos. Without sustained commitment, partnerships risk stagnating, leaving only the appearance of innovation rather than realizing meaningful, transformative change.

This essay is not a roadmap but an invitation: to others who are struggling, who are exhausted, who are wondering whether partnership is worth the cost. We offer our reflections as a form of companionship on this journey. The work of transformation is slow, uncertain, and often lonely. It is also vital, generative, and, when done in community, sustainable. We hope this reflection contributes to that community, and to the ongoing conversation about how we might collectively build more equitable, collaborative, and humanizing educational spaces.

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