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Opinion piece

Critical reflections on staff-student partnership and 're-interpreting' journal submissions

Lorna M. Cork¹

Abstract

This thought-piece shares some personal reflections on a distinctively different approach to student-staff collaboration, whereby students 're-interpret' scholarly submissions to this new HE journal for a wider audience. Student and staff motivations for becoming involved in this work of partnering are examined, and values and 'intrigue' are uncovered as contributing to partnership-readiness and sustaining interest. Students engaged critically with Higher Education policy and theory; particularly the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and the concept of a ladder of partnership. The collaboration offers different conceptual lenses, revealing possibilities for the co-creation of a student-staff scholarly community. Student reflections reveal digital literacies for producing re-interpretations and the 'softer' skills for collaborating in diverse groups. However, the key appeal of getting involved is not, as may be assumed, for benefits such as employability, it is the opportunity of collaborating across disciplines and as an equal partner with staff, where their voices contribute to real debates about teaching and learning in HE.

Keywords: Staff student partnership; ladder of participation; partnership-readiness; reinterpretation.

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Introduction: A working definition of reinterpretation

'Reinterpretation' is the word we have adopted to capture how students are responding to the scholarly articles submitted for publication in a peer-reviewed open access journal. These responses in themselves form part of the publication, and have been produced in partnership with staff, both the authors of articles and with other members of the editorial team. For me, staff partnership with students who reinterpret 'traditional' journal submissions has been one of the most enthralling aspects of my involvement in the project to launch the University of Leicester's Journal of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (JLTHE).

As a 'working-definition' a reinterpretation author:

Rethinks' submissions to the journal in different/creative forms (e.g. short videos, podcasts, comics, infographics etc.). The key purpose is to help articles to reach a wider audience, particularly students.

This definition was itself debated and confirmed at an initial workshop with myself, as the new point of contact for reinterpretation authors, 2 other colleagues and 6 students volunteering to become reinterpretation authors. The workshop, and the opportunity to revisit the definition of reinterpretation, signalled the intention of a collaborative partnership culture from the onset. The first issue of the journal, several months after that introductory workshop, provides a pleasing opportunity to pause, exhale and reflect.

Student motivational drivers for partnering with staff

'My initial interest in the Journal of Learning and Teaching was grounded on nothing but intrigue' is a view from a student reinterpretation author, echoing elements of my own *staff* perspective. In discussions at the workshop, students explained that the most significant aspects of the journal's appeal were: 'accessibility, encouragement, equal welcome of staff and student submissions, research, and scholarship' and, what appeared most important - the opportunity to contribute more to the higher education debate. 'Interpretation offers an interesting way of building on the JLTHE's intentions to present debates about higher education in an accessible manner.' This postgraduate student, also noted the following barrier to that aspiration:

'Some students (perhaps particularly undergraduates) might be unfamiliar with some terminology or key concepts relating to pedagogy or to higher education more widely.'

Staff motivational drivers for partnering with students

Arguably, the motivation for partnership is intrinsically linked with values. Prominent researchers in the field (Flint, 2017; Healey et al, 2014) and the Higher Education Academy (HEA, 2011) advocate explicit sharing of values between partners. There were two drivers in my own case. Firstly, underpinned by values of equity, diversity and inclusiveness, working collaboratively with a diverse range of students: undergraduates, postgraduates across different disciplines, campus based and distance learners was appealing; secondly, being in a position to encourage diverse representation among the student demographics. With my teaching experience concentrated in the School of Education at Masters level, it was a welcome opportunity to develop cross-university working with the Leicester Learning Institute and colleagues and students from other disciplines. This reflects the University's values, emphasising teams and leaders collaborating to achieve strategic priorities.



Figure 4: Reinterpretation author workshop

Partnership-readiness for reinterpretation

As a relatively novel concept, reinterpretation authors had no model or blueprint for the role. The initial challenge therefore was to develop a shared understanding of aims. Moreover, these were to be transfigured into tangible, indeed publishable, 're-interpreted' outcomes. Collectively, it was agreed:

'The most significant outcome of the project would be the readiness to publish an online journal as a collaboration between staff and students.'

Publication-readiness brings to the fore partnership-readiness. What constitutes 'partnership-readiness' in HE and how may this be facilitated at a strategic and day-to-day level? For this underexplored area, reflective questions from a student-engagement tool (HEA, 2014) provided support in raising questions about underlying issues, assessing institutional readiness and identifying gaps and priorities for the future.

Pedagogy for critical engagement with reinterpretation

Using a 'flipped learning' approach (Sharples, 2014), students came prepared to the reinterpretation workshop. Taking advantage of the content as well as the form of an example report, see Figure 1, they were prompted to consider how they might reinterpret this account of a 2017 staff student partnership conference, whilst at the same time engaging with theories and practices of staff student partnership.

Learning and Teaching Development Conference Students as partners: Working together to navigate the learning Journey 9th June 2017 at SOAS, Russell Square, London

Report by Dr Lorna Cori

Introduction Context

Students as partners: Working together to navigate the learning Journey." With such direct connection to the student-staff partnering on our Journal of Learning and Teaching in Higher Boutation (ILT-18) Considered in imperative to share details of the conference with our editorial board. The conference with our editorial board. The conference is the fourth in the series of annual Teaching and Learning Development conferences hasted by SOAS/Liniversity of London. On communicating the information, I was pleased to be invited to attend on behalf of our board and to write this report.

Conference insights: models and manifestations of partnership

A major feature of the conference was how, in very different ways, the concept of staff-student partnership was examined thoroughly and critically throughout the day's keynote presentations, parallel sessions and "lighthing talks" (around 20 'sessions' cumulatively). If, for instance, we consider 'collaboration' as a manifestation of partnership, the sessions included examples of collaborative learning with students as producers' in research collaboration with a cademic and student-staff collaboration in the examining of reading lists. Other partnership models included peer-mentioning and different manifestations of the supervisor-student relationship. Discussions with external delegates suggest that they found many of the models innovative and inspiring.

Some of the sessions were primarily student-led, a very practical example of student-staff delivery. A candid session was 'incorporating positionality and lived experience into SOAS dassrooms: A desciologic approach' where students discussed their framework aimed at developing more 'inclusive and safe' diverse desarrooms. As emphasised by SOAS colleagues, SOAS is one the most 'international' of universities. Student ambassadors on the day was another practical example of student presence and they were suitably ambassadorial in their contribution. Student presenter, ambassadoris and delegates appeared engaged, as was I in the ambassadorial editorial board member role. Having provided a sense of the conference and descion, the report now focuses on 2 keynote speeches which, especially the latter, have important implications for our editorial board.

in writing this report, the policy context to staff-student partnership cannot be cmitted. Or Pickup (SOAS) described the policy context as problematic but with significant opportunities. The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) process with such a politically engaged student body was noted as was the 'messy' nature of partnership and the 'London effect' where apparency, it is recognised (but not accounted for in the TEF) that students in London adopt a more critical stance. Rather than using purely in Rational Student Survey, Or Pickup called for new, creative ways of conceptualizing the student experience and littening to the student overlice, referring to Dunne and Zanostra's (2011) theoretical model of students as change agents. His key message was that despite the challenges, commitment to student engagement and partnership must remain. To faciliste the, be emphasized the need to invest energy and resources in developing the expertise of both students and staff to facilists partnership working; a point the editorial board has already recognised in planning development days.

Engaging students as partners and change agents: Dr Abbie Flint

As context, Dr Flint is the convenor of the RAISE, (Researching, Advancing and Inspiring Student Engagement) network, a project which will be covered by one of the keynote speakers, Colin Bryson, at our own, very imminent, Teaching and Learning conference. It is also interesting to note her mention of the relatively new intermetional Journal for Students as Partners.

A critical stance to student-staff pertnership was adopted throughout Dr Filnt's keynote and she asked delegates to similarly stand back and reflect on the purpose of our partnerships. The pedagogic, ethical and political were the main rationales noted in a recent (2016) HEA publication. Or Pilnt eutubined us to be clear about our aims for partnership to support their resiliation and prevent misconceptions between partners. Settor examples of how different motivations influence definitions were shown. The HEA for example focuses on active engagement for learning and the QAA on joint working to enhance student experience and underpinning values varied accordingly.

An effective characteristic of the presentation was the call to reflect on implications for practice. An example being when delegates were asked to scrutinize the values underpinning their own partnerships, how we enact these values, and equally important, to share the values with those with whom we are partnering and ask the question so we share the same values? Values mentioned included respect and reciprocity.

Or Plint's own understanding of partnership is of a specific form of student engagement, an experiential model, where co-learning is created and relationarips are key. She discussed a pedagogical relational for such pertnership, developing knowledge and capabilities of both staff and students. It was advised that we reflect on which students are involved in partnership and what roles they have. Resonating with the keynote from Dr Folkoup, we were reminded of the dynamic nature of Higher Education partnerships and the numerous factors shaping how partnership operate: context, including the political context, the culture of the institution among others.

A scholarly lens intensified the critical focus; drawing attention to an array of models and adapted models of student-staff partnership. The model of students as Change Agents reinforced Dr Flint's perspective that student-staff partnership is an active process with an element of agency. The ladder of student engagement was a simple yet effective conception of some stages of partnership, with manipulation being the first rung, more student agency as we climb the ladder and student-staff equity at the top. It was suggested as a possible tool to support critical reflection on where our practice would be located.

A particularly interesting, more detailed model was the 'community' model, drawing on McMillan and Chagig (1986) which starts from 'membership' to 'shared emotional connection.' The model explores OF rilins's question: what would a genuine shared community of staff and student partnership look like? An excellent question with which to end the report of a truly inapining conference with much for our journal's board members to reflect and learn from at this very early stage of our staff-student partnering journey.

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HEA (2016) Framework for student engagement through partnership. York, HEA.

Figure 4: Short report from attending a one-day conference on Staff Student Partnership.

Students engaged critically with theoretical models, concepts and discourse mentioned in the report, and could see the benefits for their own learning beyond the project and the University. Critical reading, thinking and analysis being valuable intellectual, personal and societal powers. Presentation opportunities for students on the day were embedded in the design; one student voluntarily shared relevant insights from an intern position in a publishing house, another spoke about how podcasts were a highly accessible medium for students to access and share ideas. The development of critical literacy and presentation skills as a pedagogic rationale was integrated with 'facilitating planning' to 'present academic ideas using digital media' as encouraged by JISC (2015, p.2).

Co-creation and questions for a new understanding

Significantly, when the reinterpretation authors were asked to share questions at the start of the workshop planned to foster partnership-readiness, the queries firstly focused on the practical, seeking timescales and 'templates and frameworks' to guide them. Alongside the understandable emphasis on securing clarification, the students were probing the nature of the task: 'to what extent can you change the original,' and in working with authors, 'what are the protocols?'

By the end of the workshop, group members appeared clearer about different means by which they could reinterpret journal submissions, some of the sensitivities around interaction with authors and the practicalities of reinterpretation including that the first issue was planned in a few months' time. The group also seemed clearer, as was the intention, that as a new pursuit, and as a partnership in action, there was no pre-configured template. Instead, the processes would evolve through cocreation.

Although in depth-theoretical exploration is not an aim of these reflections, the approach to partnership is informed by scholarship and students' interest was a reminder of the extent to which a ladder is embedded in conceptualisations of staff-student partnership (Bovill & Bulley, 2011). This early stage of our own partnership-working suggests that depending on the nature of the activities, staff and students as individuals and groups may be at different levels, at different times, even within the same time period. The model suggested by a ladder, may, depending on interpretation, depict either a quite rigid hierarchy or flexibility to manoeuvre roles. The visionary horizon scanning essential for strategic leadership may also be embodied. Three students working as a group constructed reinterpretation protocols for us all, in draft by the end of the workshop; this was a rapid move from 'what are the protocols?' to 'here are some protocols.'

Student engagement with the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)

Initially unanticipated although not surprising is the extent of the students' interest in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) for UK Higher Education. It was not intended as a prominent section of the conference report, originally written for the editorial board to explore examples of effective staff-student engagement practice. One group suggested reinterpreting the report into an 'an interactive document... what is the TEF...Hover over phrases and see a panel popup with expansion, or video clip explaining.' Beyond individual institutions, this may question the extent of sector-wide opportunities for students to be fully informed of such important aspects of HE policy. Recalling debates immediately following TEF outcomes, the student voice appears significant by its very absence.

Theories and practicalities of partnership

Staff-student partnership literature appears to be re-shifting again, more toward theories of collaborative communities of learning and practice (Bryson, 2016; Meacham et al, 2013). Frequent communication exchange, shared decision-making, the pooling of ideas and expertise are very evident in our own experience and together indicate that a culture of collaboration is emerging.

Marquis et al. (2017) acknowledges that 'some scholars have also questioned the generally positive thrust about student-faculty partnership', and this project too has distinct challenges, even in the frequently cited aspect of limitations of time. The deeply thoughtful, considered nature of the reinterpretation process seemed at times a sharp contrast to the quest, indeed need for moving forward within the tight timescale of journal scheduling.

Risks associated with this constructivist approach to the reinterpretation process were apparent as the publication deadline loomed. Communication revealed that some aspects could be further clarified at all levels of the collaborative. Intense dialogue continued in various spheres, revealing both the challenges and possibilities of staff-student partnership.

The on-line digital format of the journal can offset some of these risks and indeed be advantageous. Strategically, it offers scope to include post-publication reinterpretations, amassing ongoing interest and building on this to attract new authors, readers and reinterpretation authors for subsequent issues. Pedagogic and wider benefits include exploring and developing aspects of digital media to develop both staff and student digital literacy and competency. As pointed out in a recent report, these are being increasingly linked to employability (Meade/CELT, 2017).

Significant outcome

The readers of this first issue of the JLTHE will naturally be aware that the 'most significant' outcome of readiness for publication as a staff-student collaboration has been achieved. A podcast of a four-

way conversation about staff student partnership (Blacklaws, Mustafa & Mohamed, 2018) and a visual journey through University learning spaces (Abdelkarim, Alsahira & Watson, 2018) are the initial outputs from the approach. Reinterpretation authors have all been actively on board as learners and as producers, can be rightly proud of their collaboratively-constructed reinterpretations. The paramount learning from my own critical reflection is that, paradoxically, the very innovativeness, and exciting nature of this endeavour is intrinsic to the inherent possibilities, innate challenges and ultimate persistence needed to fulfil these possibilities.

Co-conclusion

The customary practice in writing about staff-student partnership is for 'staff' to write, citing academics, with quotes from students for their 'lived voices,' although some journals are giving these voices more space (Brooke: 2017). Whilst not intended as an academic research paper, this article is a product of scholarly convention: students' extracts have been integrated at natural points, in particular the section on student motivational drivers. Not claiming these reflections as fully collaborative writing, it seems essential to incorporate some 'un-interpreted' *verbatim*, student reflections as concluding perspectives to the article.

Student reflections: collaboration and reinterpretation

In terms of collaboration, the relationship between those developing the re-interpretations and the author of the original piece also merits consideration. The original author may have views on the most effective form a reinterpretation of their work might take, or wish to highlight particular findings or arguments that they would like to see given an alternative format. It seems important then, to clarify the relationship between the author of the piece and the reinterpretation process, as their input may make for more effective, more useful reinterpretations.

The ways in which the journal is circulated may have an impact on approaches to re-interpretation in order to address the aim of reaching a wider audience. For example, if social media will be widely used to promote particular journal submissions, then re-interpretation might be focused on formats which can be easily engaged with on those platforms – extremely detailed diagrams or infographics, for instance, might not work as well.

Student reflections: Different skills

I was quite surprised at the ease of which undergraduates, postgraduates and academic professionals were contributing towards building the design of the reinterpretation journal and each person had something very useful to share despite their different academic group. Especially with a project of this kind - opening up scholarly articles to those more unfamiliar with the subject, be it undergraduates or academics of a different discipline - there is scope to realise the true benefits of a student-staff collaboration. The different skills pertaining to each group have neatly come together in our endeavour so far to develop quite an exciting prospect. So far our journal looks like it will be a creative approach to accessing education which not only promotes the virtue of broadening our intellectual interests but also celebrates the successes that come out of respectful and diligent work between students and staff in higher education.

Student reflections: Excited for the possibilities

From the first meeting, workshop and email correspondence, my knowledge and understanding of the aim of the journal has become solidified. At the beginning the possibilities and outcomes were unclear, but what was clear was that this endeavour was about shared interest and partnership between

students and staff. Most importantly it was apparent to me that, I as an undergraduate was an equal to the staff in this partnership. Furthermore, the role of the reinterpretation author highlights the importance of student perspectives in discussions about teaching and higher education. Now following weeks of information exchange and discussions, I can wholeheartedly say, I am excited for the possibilities and outcomes that can develop from this venture.

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