



Cork, L. M. (2018). Critical reflections on staff-student partnership and 're-interpreting' journal submissions. *Journal of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*. 1(1).

Opinion piece

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

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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.

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 under-explored 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.

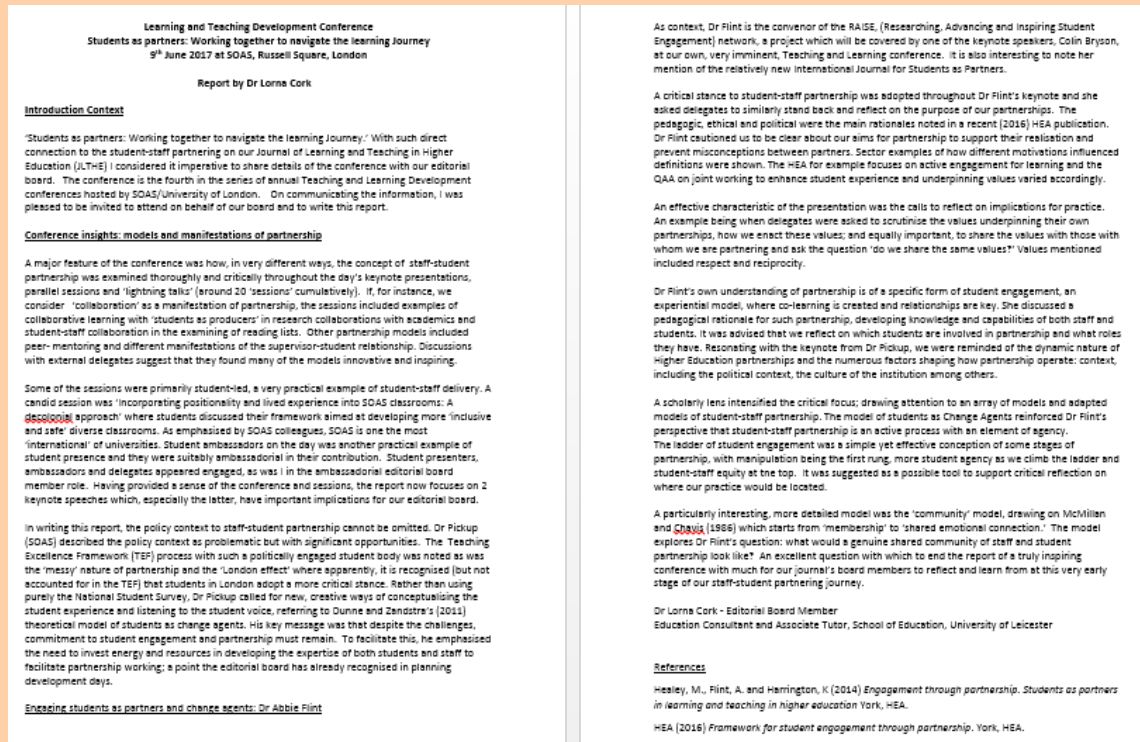


Figure 4: Short report from attending a one-day conference on Staff Student Partnership.

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 co-creation.

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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