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Podcast transcript

A reinterpretation of 'Critical reflections on staff-student partnership and 're-interpreting' journal submissions' Cork et al. (2018)

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Transcript

KB. My name is Katie Bridger and I am a PhD student at the University of Leicester. To me staff – student collaboration would ideally be a relationship based on trust, that way any problems that might come up can be resolved and any successes can be celebrated both creating a sense of achievement.

VS (Volko Straub). Staff student collaboration really means to me ideally communication and action. There is a two way stream of interaction between students and staff. Most important point is that requires student engagement and that is the main challenge to get students engaged in my opinion. When students are interested than we can have a communication and we can communicate about things and talk about things and that than leads to improvements, to changes, challenges my attitude, challenges what I do and how I can implement, how I can change things.

[Unknown]. 1st year biology student and I believe student staff collaboration is about students' voices being heard by the staff of the University.

NB (Nicola Blacklaws). Today we are here to talk about the theme of student staff collaboration and student partnership as part of a reinterpretation of a conference report of an event that was held earlier this year at SOAS on the theme of student as partners and this is all part of the first issue of the Journal for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. My name is Nicola Blacklaws. I am a PhD student in the History department here at Leicester and I am one of the reinterpretation authors working on the journal.

NM (Najima Mohamed). My name is Najima Mohamed. I am a neuroscience student at the University of Leicester and I am also a reinterpretation author working on this piece.

AA (Azza Abdulla). My name is Azza Abdulla and I am the Education Officer of the Students' Union.

FD (Frances Deepwell). And I am Frances Deepwell. I am the Director of the Leicester Learning Institute.

LC (Lorna Cork). And, I am Lorna Cork. I am the Reinterpretation Lead on the staff perspective where I work in the School of Education.

NB. Let's get into it than. So what we that we would do is start with asking people who we have round this table, what student staff collaboration means to you in the context of University and Higher Education.

NM. So Dr Cork shall we start with you, as you are the author of the piece we are going to reinterpret today?

LC. Student staff collaboration to me focusses on harnessing the collective energy and collective intellectual capacity of a group. The contention is that by collaborating, then not only are we more than the sum of each part, we form a scholarly community and we also form a way of drawing on all the expertise within the different members and it start from the premise, the values are, that each and every one, whether you are a student or member of staff, has some expertise, and has some contribution, and has some power towards this collective.

FD. And you raise an interesting point there when you talk about power because I think with the students as partners, which is the mantra that is often used in the sector, I think it underplays the power relations that exist between people that are positioned as staff members against student members. The staff member typically would have power of awarding marks, awarding degrees, necessarily upsets a sense of a partnership, because how true can a partnership be when the educational outcome is dependent upon what the academic staff member would consider to be successful. So, if the student was having a successful outcome but was not getting that acknowledged by the staff member than that would not be successful, whereas the 'collaboration' word is far less loaded than 'partnership'. I think that students have an enormously rich role to play in collaborating on and in Higher Education.

AA. I agree that student staff collaboration is vital, especially in the socio-political climate we are living in today. I think Higher Education Institutions really set a precedent for the world that we live in and can elevate, add or decrease the inequality we find in society. So I think it is really important that we find ways to make sure that student staff collaboration actually works. Because although it sounds like a really nice term it doesn't happen as much, especially with the amount of pressure put on Course Reps. How can we engage student to collaborate in their learning and teaching environment without feeling it's putting a pressure on them.

FD. I think we don't probably understand enough about student motivations to getting involved in collaborations.

NM. I think it is interesting you brought that up because when we had the introductory meeting for the Journal Dr Patel asked us as students, what was our motivation. She did bring up the idea of having the hours put on our HEAR [Higher Education Achievement Report] certificate, but the main thing that came out with everyone that was involved was that we just wanted to try something new, and we wanted to build skills, and we were just interested in and intrigued to see where this would go.

NB. I think you can fall into a bit of a trap, not just, I think, with student staff collaboration, but with others areas of Higher Education, where it is easy to assume that students, particularly undergraduate students, but also with postgraduates, that students would only wanted to engage with things that have a tangible CV or career benefit and if you can't demonstrate that to them, then they won't be interested, and I think how you described our first interactions with the Journal and our expressions of our motivations shows that's not always the case.

LC. And, certainly, in terms of the workshop that I facilitated what came across loud and clear was that what excited you about it was a sense of purpose and that word 'intrigue'. And I think if there are ways within Higher Education of building more, pedagogically, on developing more the sense of intrigue, then I think that is actually very beneficial. But in terms of fostering a culture of collaborations I think it is very important we find a way of preparing everybody for the collaboration journey. And make sure that it is not just based on theoretical principles, but values play such an important part, and one of the reasons I think why this has been successful is that it is based fundamentally on our values and part of the values is making sure that it is not just the student voice but the student *voices* and collectively harnessing that energy is very important. Sometimes we can use the word 'partnership' but in reality we need to deconstruct what that actually means in practice.

AA. I was just about to say the same thing, which is how can we practically make sure that this happens. Academic representation - what mechanisms can be used, I guess, from the Students Unions' point of view, but also from the Institution.

FD. One of the movements around staff student partnership is moving a little bit more away from having a select few students involved in something to having the whole cohort involved. There is very good work done of students helping to define their own assessment criteria - so very much embedded within the curriculum, within the norms and practices of Higher Education. Students have shown how they can do this really effectively. But it takes a mind-set - I think Lorna is right in that it takes this understanding, getting everybody prepared for what might happen. It takes some structure, takes some planning. The whole cohort piece I think is really powerful.

LC. It certainly is and I think inclusiveness is a key theme and I like what you said because what can happen is that, as with other types of partnership, you have somebody that represent itself as an entity, because what can happen is that the same person attends every meeting as a community representative for example, attends every meeting as if I am a representative of a particular course and in reality that voice may not actually be particularly representative of all the voices within that course or within that community. So the more we can get more people involved in voicing their concerns, voicing what they find of strengths, then the better.

AA. I just feel that students might not think that they are empowered to actually make any sort of change or change that they will tangibly see. A lot of students might feel 'well, OK, if I a change it might be for the next coming students - why should they have a better experience than me' which is obviously a very selfish outlook, but, I guess, nowadays, I guess, with rising tuition fees it is the mind-set of most students.

LC. It is a mind-set. I think part of what I am trying to do, and what in all partnerships, is to develop a much more altruistic mind-set. Really, I am thinking if we want to change not just the experience in University but change the mind-set outside of University as well, and bearing in mind that you will be the future leaders, then, if we don't have enough discourse, then we will perpetually, we will continually, be having the same types of angle on some of the world's issues.

FD. And I think what has been really interesting is we have a project officer who has come in to help us identify what partnerships go on across the University. In the interview it was very clear that he was coming at it from a very, very inclusive perspective, which was quite a world apart from some of the conversations that had been going on prior to that. Those kind of conceptions are the ones I really want us to be moving towards.

LC. Absolutely. And to me, this project is a microcosm of that, because, if you noticed the way I facilitated, it was a collaborative type of stance, but also in terms of pedagogically, it's putting in things such as building on some of the technical capital. For example, some people had more expertise technologically, but it is building on that and being able to say 'well, ok, all I can do is trigger, and stimulate, and point, and signpost. But I had every trust that we will get to this stage and you have earned that trust.

AA. Yeah. And I think it goes back to empowerment, so if students feel like they are part of something then not only will they most engage, but also we are trying to engage the ones that aren't really feeling that education is for them and accessible.

NM. That empowerment is really important because, when we have had the workshops for the Journal, especially in the last one we had about the reinterpretation, you asked us at the beginning 'how well do we understand this role?' and at the end of the workshop you asked us again. It was through you teaching us – 'this is what we want to do for the journal, these are the skills that you might need', that empowered us to then go 'well actually we can achieve this' and we went off in groups. I am a final year student, yet Nicola is a PhD student, but we managed, from just the fundamentals that you put down, to come together in this collaboration to build this.

NB. And we're different disciplines as well.

FD. The Students' Union enables allot of interdisciplinary groups coming together, but then they're not necessarily thinking about educational or academic outcomes. So, by pulling people together around the journal idea, I think it's got the benefit of both pieces. But you are very few in number, and its only one journal, and I just *do* wonder how we can then cascade some of this learning.

NM. I think the main thing about the why it worked is coming back to what Dr Cork said about shared values in your report. It doesn't matter what discipline we're from, it doesn't matter that we are students and you are both respected academics. But the fact that we had shared values, and we knew from the beginning what our aims were, then, I feel like, we could go on step by step and achieve.

LC. And part of that is we actually co-constructed some of those aims as well. But, in terms of sustainability, I see this as a leader, because my background is educational leadership - is modelling the kind of leadership that I would like to be *transforming* you and the way you operate. So some of the lessons learnt from here, because in the same way I have actually built on the collaborative style of supervision that I had, and I think that role models are really important in that respect.

AA. So in the Students' Union our role is to represent students and to make sure that we advocate for the rights and priorities that students want. The Students' Union is very *action now* and I feel like the institution is very *action tomorrow*. But we're finding ways of maybe working together to push change that works practically.

LC. Absolutely. And it's having a very strategic approach as well in terms of a positive strategic leadership where we're actually looking beyond just tomorrow. One of the things about this project that has been, in some ways, very challenging, is that in sometimes I have actually believed that it

looks like we're expecting clarity and in reality we are co-constructing. And in the world of co-construction that clarity is not always there all the time. It's for us to refocus on and try to clarify together.

FD. I think you articulated that really clearly along the journey, which really has been a major benefit to your leadership in this role. Do you feel, as Azza is saying, that the University works on the principle of student voice - will gather feedback and then feedforward to the next module or next run of the module - whether you have experienced any student voice activity that's felt more...

LC. Are you are talking about outside of the journal?

FD. Yes, just generally, in your sort of experience.

NM. I personally don't feel like my student voice has been heard in the way that it has been in this journal. Because my own experience of me/others hearing my student voice has been through surveys, perhaps at the end of modules or at the end of the year. A case of ticking boxes. It's not always just the case of point blank. But with Journal it's been dialogue from the beginning of this course and I feel that *that* is a lot better.

NB. I think sometimes the voice of research post graduates who are arts and humanities - and the reason that we are arts and humanities is relevant is that we don't have labs so we don't have a physical place to go every day - is that, I think, the things that are important to us and the things, the less tangible things that make our experience, as young researchers, a lot more positive are often not necessarily acknowledged by the wider institution as being important. This is something I think is more important than often people acknowledge and that's the option for study space for arts and humanities research students. In the history department we have it a lot better than a lot of other departments. We have buildings on Salisbury Road where there are spaces. I have a desk that's mine and I go to everyday. Lots and lots of others, not just in this university but in lots of universities, don't have that and it's really easy to say 'Oh, that's not really an important thing. You can do you work anywhere'. But an example I would like to give when people imply that maybe having a space, an allocated space for you in your department, isn't important, is early this year I was on sick leave for a while. People who weren't my supervisors noticed I wasn't there and asked after me. My office mate was texting me to say 'Oh, such and such person came in and asked where you where today' and I don't think that is a small or not important thing.

FD. It's very much about the University caring for you, isn't it? A sense of somebody knows how you are, who's minded how you are doing on a day to day basis.

NB. Yeah, absolutely, I think that Leicester is kind of trying to make on that particular issue is trying to make space...

AA. I agree, I mean, it was only until my 3rd year that I actually feel like that there as a staff member that cared about me. I did not have a connection with me personal tutor. Didn't have a connection with any staff member really, because there's just a lot of students.

NB. That's exactly it.

AA. Until my final year, final year where my dissertation supervisor made me feel...

NB. I think there is also something that is not very tangible, but makes you feel really good, about people - who aren't your allocated person - being interested in you.

FD. Part of what you're saying speaks to two really key agendas. Talking in terms of agendas - but they are really what we are trying to foster in the University. One is around academic community and that includes undergraduates as well as postgraduates. The other is around spaces - spaces where that can happen. So we're just putting in place, we're implementing a Learning Spaces Strategy, which is trying to physically construct spaces where students can feel 'This is where I can go'. I will meet people who are experts in this, in this place, it won't be a sort of bland space which is a pop-up classroom. It will be a place that belongs to that discipline. An understanding of what academic works looks like in this discipline - 'How does this feel?' 'Well, I go there and I will absorb it, and I feel part of that community just from being there.'

LC. And it also triggers another collaborative... and what I am finding with this group is interesting is that you're working on this as a reinterpretation. But there is another collaborative with me and they're working just on that 'spaces' and they've taken photographs of learning spaces as reinterpreting an article, so that quite interesting. When you talked about the themes, I thought we were going to talk about the theme of *belonging*. Because within the literature and within the Higher Education Academy and the general literature, this theme of *belonging* keeps coming up - and I think that's really worth interrogating. And again, part of my underlying values. But my values come from - and I think perhaps that's partly why this is somewhat different - my values also come from working elsewhere other than in universities. Fullan (<https://www.nationalcollege.org.uk/cm-mc-ssl-resource-moral-purpose.pdf>) talks about moral purpose, so, is part of that moral purpose to try and create a sense of belonging? Belonging... If we want to retain more students, because we do find that there are certain groups in particular less likely to want to stay in Universities in general, we are not talking about the University of Leicester in particular. But if we are going to look at that retention then I think creating that sense of belonging is one aspect that is worth exploring. And obviously we can't go into too much detail in just this podcast. But, from the students perspective because, again in terms of a common learning approach, it's learning from you. So we have a policy, we have various theories, but how does that sink with what students are experiencing.

NM. After reflecting on our experiences of student staff collaboration and our ideas it would be fitting for us to finish on: what would we class as a successful student partnership? Frances would you like to....

FD. I think I will class a successful student partnership as not being seen as some big project you have to undertake. It's just a shift in perspective, its shift in the way you understand relations with students. So for me it's a mind-set, it's a value set.

LC. I believe that success is going to be longer term as well. So, at the moment we feel that this is a successful one, and it is, but I would like to think that say in five years-time or in ten years-time you as leaders, the shapers of this new changing world, would still have shaped the way of leading, of thinking, within this complex environment.

AA. I was just going to quickly say, sorry, just the concept of how Universities are becoming increasingly diverse and how learning and teaching in the curriculum should really be explored in terms of making sure that that matches the diversity as a tagline and of marketing. The university really needs to be working harder to make sure that with rising tuition fees students actually feel part of the spaces that they pay so much to be in.

NB. I think the thing that would make me most excited about student staff collaborations is the inclusion of people from across the academic spectrum. From able to include undergraduates to post graduates to early careers researchers to established academics. That there is room for international

students, room for distance learners, being able to collaborate in a way that enables all of these different groups to be a part of the work that you are doing.

NM. On that note, I'll call an end to the pod cast. I don't think we could have ended it on a better note.