

Interpreting the concept of students as partners in a large distance-learning institution

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ABSTRACT: The concept of students as partners is becoming increasingly prominent in higher education, as institutions seek to articulate innovative but durable pedagogies that will improve teaching and learning in a fast-changing world. One benefit of the partnership model is that it intersects naturally with key concerns such as student engagement, retention and success; employability; assessment; and linking teaching and research. It thus offers a coherent overarching principle through which policy and practice can develop productively.

The ethos of the UK's Open University (OU), with its emphasis on openness, accessibility, and lifelong learning, aligns easily with the concept of students as partners, but there are other features of the institution that pose challenges for its adoption. Most obviously, OU students are dispersed, studying from home, and almost all study part-time. There is also the problem of scale, with the OU's 170,000 students spread around the four nations of the UK, not to mention several thousand international students. Another difference between the OU and conventional universities is that, for many of the OU's academic staff, 'teaching' involves producing distance-learning materials, often without actually meeting any students personally. The teachers with whom students have the most direct contact are part-time Associate Lecturers: they offer group teaching, often online, and mark students' work, but have relatively little input into either curriculum or the institutional structures that determine contexts for teaching. Thus, many of the strategies used in other universities to promote the partnership model of teaching and learning are less appropriate for the OU.

In 2015 a small group of staff in the OU's Faculty of Arts set up a project under the auspices of the UK's Higher Education Academy (HEA) to promote 'engaged student learning', with the HEA's 'Engagement through partnership' workstream providing scholarly underpinning. The lessons learned from that close-grained work with small groups of students on a single first-year module, complemented by current SoTL findings, are now being translated into faculty-wide policies and practices. How the 'students as partners' concept is being interpreted on a large scale is the focus of this paper.

1 INTRODUCTION: LONG MARCH OF THE ACRONYMS

For at least a quarter of a century the concept of students as partners has been stimulating developments in adult and higher education (see, for example, Agee, 1991), and the growing body of scholarly literature now includes an *International Journal for Students as Partners*, launched in 2016. 'SaP' has joined the list of widely recognised acronyms in the scholarship of teaching and learning.

SaP approaches have been mainly associated with higher education institutions in North America and Australia, but are now becoming more prominent in the UK, too. Sabine Little's edited volume *Staff-student partnerships in higher education* (2011) presents a range of SaP initiatives, many of them derived from the Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs) that were funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England from 2005 to 2010. The Open University (OU), the distance-learning institution identified in the title of this paper, hosted a cluster of such Centres, and collectively the 'Open CETL' contributed to the OU's institutional strategies, especially Teaching and Learning. Although OU CETLs did not focus on SaP, the later project described here was influenced by the methodology that characterised the OU's Personalised Integrated Learning Support (PILS) CETL.

This later project was also part of a national initiative, instigated by the Higher Education Academy (HEA). In 2014/15, as part of its work to develop and support innovative pedagogies, the HEA launched a Strategic Enhancement Programme (SEP) on the theme of engaged student learning. Twenty higher education providers around the UK, including the OU, were selected to participate, with the aim of identifying and developing 'high impact' approaches to promote student engagement.

Project leaders were encouraged to collaborate and exchange ideas, using the HEA Framework for partnership in learning and teaching to develop a common understanding of what the projects sought to achieve. With partnership learning communities at its heart, the HEA model identifies four key areas where SaP approaches can be developed:

- Learning, teaching and assessment;
- Curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy;
- Subject-based research and inquiry;
- Scholarship of teaching and learning. (Healey et al, 2014, 25)

The HEA model also identifies levels at which partnership approaches are embodied in higher education institutions, from the ‘localised’ level, with dispersed or discrete areas of partnership activity, through successive stages of integration to the ‘transformational’ level where partnership is recognisable as one of the core strengths of an institution (or faculty or department). The twenty projects contributing to the HEA SEP represented a wide range of practices, on diverse scales from institution-wide to programme- or subject-based activities.

2 A DIFFERENT CONTEXT FOR PARTNERSHIP: PART-TIME DISTANCE LEARNING

Whenever the OU is involved in teaching and learning projects alongside conventional UK higher education institutions, certain differences come to the fore, not least because of the OU’s size – with over 170,000 students it is the largest academic institution in the UK – and the fact that it operates across all four UK jurisdictions as well as internationally. So even though the HEA programme on partnership encouraged a variety of approaches, the OU project team, representing the only distance-learning institution among the twenty participants, inevitably started from a different place.

However, with its emphasis on openness, accessibility, and lifelong learning, the OU’s ethos provides a suitable seed-bed for developing SaP strategies and practices. In recent years the OU Students’ Association has successfully extended its institutional role, and co-operation between the University and the Association has led to the creation of a Student Charter. This is not a rule-book but a declaration of values, explicitly describing ‘the way in which students and staff should work together in partnership so that everyone can benefit’ (Open University, n.d.).

So far, the ideal of student partnership has been articulated at the OU mainly through representation and consultation. The President of the Students’ Association is a member of the OU’s Senior Team, another student sits on the University’s Council, and six more are appointed by the Students’ Association as members of the Senate. Students are also represented on central governance committees and decision-making bodies at Faculty level, such as Boards of Study. Even so, the number of representatives in relation to overall student numbers is necessarily small, and, given the geographical spread and wide age-range of the student body, any notional links between representation and typicality are hard to sustain. Another complicating factor is the part-time nature of (most) OU study: 70% of OU students have jobs, and often full-time careers. Also, OU students are home-based, many with family and/or caring responsibilities. So even being involved in consultations may be problematic for time-challenged learners. However, through the OU’s widespread online systems, students are increasingly contributing to consultations, and large student panels enable staff to gather feedback on topics such as library services, or the development of new online modes of module delivery. Another way ‘the student voice’ is heard is through the extensive student surveys that have always been a feature of the OU’s educational research work.

These structural elements of student representation and consultation are important steps along the road to envisaging students as partners, but still some distance from the ideals of co-learning and co-researching that sit at the heart of ‘transformational’ partnership. So involvement in the engaged student learning strand of the HEA’s 2014/5 SEP enabled a small OU team to examine some of the fundamental questions about student engagement with an ultimate aim of supporting partnership learning communities. Our focus was a large interdisciplinary Arts first-year module where another of the OU’s distinctive features throws the issue of student engagement into the spotlight: the OU’s open entry policy means that many of its new students come to university-level study after a break from secondary education, and in some cases their previous educational experiences have been limited. So whereas in conventional HE institutions part of the first-year focus is on ‘transition’ from school to university or college, at the OU the idea of transition is fainter: during their first year or two of part-

time study many students are adjusting to unfamiliar demands and developing new identities as students. This makes the concept of student engagement especially meaningful. So taking our cue from Ella Kahu's emphasis on 'the complex array of factors influencing a student's engagement' and 'the unique nature of the individual experience' (Kahu, 2013, 766), the OU's HEA project team used close-grained qualitative methods to investigate aspects of engagement amongst first-level students drawn from groups around the UK.

The OU's teaching model means that the central academics who determine institutional teaching structures and create module materials have little direct contact with students. Instead, part-time Associate Lecturers (ALs) tutor groups of about twenty students each, being responsible for a limited amount of face-to-face tuition (student attendance is optional), some online teaching, assignment marking and feedback, and academic guidance for the students in their groups. The HEA project focused on an Arts module, *Voices, texts, and material culture* (code: A105), with a large student population – approximately 3,000 in 2014/15 – and a correspondingly large team of ALs. Whilst every effort is made to ensure consistency in terms of the tuition that ALs offer, they can also tailor their teaching to the needs of their particular student group, including individualised support and guidance. So for the HEA project seven A105 ALs, working with their own groups of students in different parts of the UK, were able to explore some specific themes relating to engaged student learning within the parameters of their usual teaching practices. The project team, which included a representative from the Students' Association, devised an initial list of themes from which the ALs chose and refined their preferred lines of inquiry. Topics ranged from investigating students' perceptions of formative assessment tasks to promoting 'learning how to learn' strategies, and, since A105 involves assessed online collaborative work, probing issues connected to online participation and collaboration. Drawing on the earlier PILS CETL's methodology of practitioner inquiries, each AL devised small adjustments to their teaching, sometimes seeking structured student feedback, then reflected on the effects of these changes, and insights gained.

3 FINDINGS FROM THE OU ARTS PROJECT

The project ran for five months, with ALs guiding their students through several pieces of formative assessment, including an initial foray into online collaboration, and four summative assessments. A105's assessment structure includes regular reflective activities, so, in tracking students' responses to their teaching adjustments, ALs were able to integrate these discussions with the development of reflective abilities. Although the ALs were working separately, the project team supported the broader aims of their work through a shared Scholarship of Teaching and Learning forum on the A105 tutors' website; this was open to all A105 tutors, not just the project ALs, and it was remarkable for the lively and constructive discussions that developed. Links from the SoTL forum included an eclectic range of resources including Meyer and Land's seminal paper on 'Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge' (2005) and notes from Ronald Barnett's work on 'dispositions' for learning (Barnett, 2007). The SoTL forum sat to one side of the project as it was initially conceived, but it was instructive to see how these conversations fed into the practice-based inquiries devised by the project ALs. Independently, the ALs also drew on their own SoTL readings, especially around the topics of assessment (e.g. Gikandi, Morrow and David, 2011) and 'performance' (e.g. Macfarlane, 2015).

It soon became clear that, despite the different starting-points of the seven ALs' work, the shared focus on engaged student learning brought common issues to the fore. A particular and basic concern for tutors working with distance-learning students is to establish, in the absence of attendance requirements, that students *are* actually engaging with the module(s) for which they are registered. Submitting assignments is the clearest measure of engagement, but interventions to follow up non-submission are often too late to help students recover. So tutors strongly encourage students to attend face-to-face tutorials (though for a variety of reasons this only suits a minority) and to participate in the online forums open to all students in a tutor's group. The assessment design of A105 supports the use of AL-led discussion in tutor-group forums by linking asynchronous online tutorials to formative assessment tasks before each piece of summative assessment. All the project ALs monitored forum participation very closely, and used a combination of strategies to involve students as actively as possible. These ranged from simple techniques such as referring to the tutor-group forum as 'Your TGF' or 'Our TGF' (questions of ownership, control, and empowerment – key SaP themes – surfaced in several of the projects) to drawing out students' reflections on their learning from formative assessment tasks; here again A105's assessment pattern provided strategic 'hooks' for such discussion.

Another way in which student engagement is conventionally supported through the OU's teaching methods is via detailed tutor feedback on students' continuous assessment. However, many tutors – including some of those involved in the HEA project – report that it is actually hard to tell whether students have learned anything from their tutor-marked assignments, and even when there may be some signs of progress in terms of mastering content, there is often less evidence of metacognitive development. Some of the ALs adopted direct approaches in encouraging students to reflect more deeply on their own learning processes, and here A105's inclusion of assessed collaborative work offered an effective entry point, because the affective dimension in collaborative learning is so prominent. These direct approaches included questionnaires (asking, for example, 'How do you feel about collaborative online work?') and forum discussions to help students refine and articulate their reflections on the experience of working collaboratively. Other ALs deliberately chose less direct approaches, for example, asking students to talk about how they took notes – a standard study skills topic – as a step on the way to reflecting on their capacity for self-awareness and self-monitoring, whether individually or in groups.

Institutional learning from the project included recognition that A105's innovative assessment strategies were effective in supporting student engagement, as was integrating 'central' module design with AL-led teaching. The seven practitioner inquiries, though thematically different and employing diverse methods, ultimately converged around some key themes, the two most prominent being students' motivation and confidence. These are crucial considerations in developing strategies for supporting relatively new part-time students, especially those with lower levels of previous academic achievement. But another interesting outcome was that although the HEA SEP was presented to ALs with the primary focus on engaged student learning rather than SaP, the outlines of potential partnership learning communities began, implicitly, to emerge. As these experienced tutors pursued their individual practitioner inquiries against the background of an OU community of practice, they were actively refining their own teaching *in the light of* their perceptions of students' engagement. Such informed responsiveness suggests that the pedagogical conditions for co-creation of teaching and learning can indeed be realised in the online context of a distance-learning institution.

4 FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

The OU's new Academic Strategy (2017) places considerable emphasis on the institution's academic communities being inclusive of and centred on students. Incorporating partnership approaches at the transformational level described in the HEA model will be challenging for an institution like the OU, but developments in several different areas suggest possibilities.

One consequence of the changes to HE funding in the UK has been an increasingly explicit institutional focus on employability. At the OU, initiatives such as an Employability Scholarship Network are foregrounding attitudinal changes, such as recognising that many of the OU's non-traditional students already possess work-related experience and skills; increasing cross-reference between the academic domain and students' careers potentially influences relationships between students and teachers. This cross-referencing can impact on assessment, and faculty policy in Arts and Social Sciences is now moving towards 'authentic' assessment. More generally, SoTL literature on assessment demonstrating the positive effects of democratic teaching and learning practices (for example, Deeley and Bovill, 2017) aligns easily with OU values. We hope for similarly positive effects by extending our current emphasis on independent study towards the promotion of undergraduate research, and thus fresh configurations of the student/AL/central staff relationship.

As a leader in digital innovation, the OU uses learning analytics to track student engagement in increasing detail, and there will be potential for new SaP interactions when future students are empowered to use predictive data for themselves. The OU's expertise in technology enhanced learning is also pointing towards the development of 'Agile' pedagogies that will impact on teacher/learner relationships. Profound changes – transformations, even – are on the horizon.

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