Students as partners: Raising the student voice in the evaluation of learning and teaching.

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Abstract

An outcome from a sectoral benchmarking review of the University of the Sunshine Coast's (USC) approach to the evaluation of learning and teaching recognised the need to change practice related to engaging students in evaluation processes. This paper provides an account of USC's in-progress design of an alternative student feedback process that espouses a Students as Partners mindset. The premise of this mindset is a partnership approach to engage staff and students in the process of student learning and teaching enhancement. Such a mindset offers the possibility for transformative learning experiences that empowers all those involved to be in control of their learning. The challenges to a Students as Partners institutional vision are concerned with creating a shared language of partnership, fostering partnership learning communities, and sustaining transformative learning experiences. Fundamental to this vision is a shift in institutional processes and policies that recognise, promote and reward responsive partnership learning communities.

Students as Partners: The background

The outcome from a sectoral benchmarking review of the University of the Sunshine Coast's (USC) approach to the evaluation of learning and teaching recognised that there was a need to change institutional practice related to:

- Working with students to design learning-focussed evaluation processes for learning and teaching;
- Demonstrating to all students that their input is valued and that change occurs as a result; and
- With students, co-developing and testing an alternative student feedback process for teaching and courses.

To this end, in 2016 USC became involved in one of 12 projects undertaken by Australian Universities under the auspices of the Office of Learning and Teaching. The national project, *Transforming Practice Programme 2016* focused on *Students as Partners* (Crookes, 2016).

In collaboration with students, the aim of USC's *Students as Partners* project was to initiate a culture of student engagement by working with students in the design of an alternative student feedback process as part of the evaluation of learning and teaching. The in-progress *Student as Partners* project established a systematic, yet flexible approach that positions learning as a partnership.

Students as Partners: The theory

A review of the literature recognised that the *Students as Partners* movement has sectoral recognition, relevance and the potential to impact the quality of higher education on an international scale (see for example Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014; Dunne & Zandstra, 2011; Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014; Pauli, Raymond-Barker, & Worrell, 2016; The Higher Education Academy, 2014). Healey et al., (2014) espouses a *Student as Partners* mindset as a process of *student engagement* where staff and students learn and work together to foster authentic student learning and teaching enhancement. The *Students as Partners* ethos is grounded in the contemporary theories of learning-centred teaching. This changing view, from students as passive consumers to active participants in their own learning, requires engaging students and staff authentically as partners in the process of learning (Healey et al., 2014; Pauli et al., 2016). Learning-centred approaches provide the flexibility to transcend the traditions of academe and discipline-based pedagogical practices that may inhibit engagement by staff and students in a *Students as Partners* mindset (Stewart, 2012).

In support, Weimer (2012) declares that teachers across disciplines are noticing that learning-centred approaches are resulting in experiences that permanently change how students view learning and how teachers approach teaching. At the core of a learning-centred approach are the efforts by teachers to use innovative pedagogical practices and authentic learning activities that develop student autonomy and responsibility for learning (Biggs & Tang, 2007; Weimer, 2012). At the heart of the learning-centred nature of a *Student as Partners* mindset is the *scholarship of learning and teaching* that encourages, and requires, critical reflection by stakeholders to be open to new ways of thinking, learning, acting and doing in the process of learning (Healey et al., 2014). Informed by Boyer's (1990) influential model of scholarship is the recognition that teachers are also learners. Like the scholarship of learning and teaching, the *Students as Partners* discourse emphasises the reciprocal nature of being a learner and a teacher in any learning relationship and context (Boyer, 1990; Healey et al., 2014).

Students as Partners: USC's vision

USC's vision embraces a learning-centred view *of Students as Partners* to foster genuinely transformative learning experiences for all those involved. The emerging initiative was framed within the premise of change. Making the *Students as Partners* vision happen can therefore be potentially disorientating and disconcerting for all parties. Such a vision is likely to position learners (students and teachers) within unfamiliar, and possibly new, ways of working, learning and thinking. This vision challenges the more traditional power relationships in higher education to the point where staff and students act as both scholars and colleagues engaged collaboratively in the process of learning (Healey et al., 2014; The Higher Education Academy, 2014). For USC, the areas that challenged a *Students as Partners* institutional vision were concerned with creating a shared language of partnership, fostering partnership learning communities, and sustaining transformative learning experiences. Within these areas, the following questions will be posed during the presentation to encourage collegial conversation:
> The language of partnership
> 1. How do staff and students work together to create a shared language of, and understanding about, student engagement to bring about change?
> Partnership learning communities
> 2. What is the value of a shared language to develop responsive partnership learning communities that nurture and sustain change practice?
> Transformative learning experiences

3. How to create safe, trusting and authentic learning communities, empowering all those involved to make decisions about, and be in control of, their learning?

USC's emerging initiative of the in-progress design of an alternative student feedback process as part of the evaluation of learning and teaching is framed within these troublesome questions. Realising an institutional approach to making the *Student as Partners* vision happen was guided by the four stages of student engagement: consultation, involvement, participation, and partnership (Healey et al., 2014). The theoretical underpinning of each stage offered transparency and authenticity as the University made sense of the need to change practice in raising the student voice in the evaluation of learning and teaching.

Students as Partners: USC's vision in practice

We approached this process of change through three steps.

Step 1: Consultation

The theoretical orientation of the consultation stage is to provide opportunities for students and staff to express individual opinions, perspectives, experiences, problems and concerns (Healey et al., 2014). In practice the consultation stage was directed by the need to challenge the University's established learning and teaching evaluation tool known as Student Evaluation of Teaching and Courses (SETAC) as a mechanism for effective evaluation of learning and teaching during 2016.

The consultation phase revealed that at the institutional level the mandated nature of SETAC resulted in a time sequence that was prohibitive to cultivating a *Students as Partners* approach to staff and students working together in the process of learning as the tool was administered at the completion of the semester. This resulted in a learning environment where students were positioned as passive consumers as they made judgements on the *outcome* of their learning rather than their active engagement and participation in the *process* of new learning. Students reported a sense of their voice being devalued as their feedback had limited reach to improve their learning experience. Furthermore, teachers reported a lack of control over the evaluation process and outcome, reducing staff engagement. The time sequence inhibited opportunities for teachers to foster partnership learning communities, where students and teachers could critically reflect (individually and collectively) to create new ways of thinking, learning and working.

Step 2: Involvement and participation

The theoretical underpinnings of the involvement and participation stages of student engagement are concerned with providing opportunities for students and staff as individuals to take a more active role in, and make decisions about, their learning (Pauli et al., 2016). The practical application of the involvement and participation phase that created a shared language of, and understanding about, student engagement to foster change in the process of evaluating learning and teaching is detailed in Table 1. The intention was to trial an approach to student and teacher involvement and participation by co-developing and testing an alternative student feedback process that promotes student voice.

Timeframe	Student engagement activity
Prior to Semester:	Students designed an alternative set of five (5) quantitative and two (2) qualitative evaluation questions to trigger reflective dialogue during the experience of learning.

Week 4/5: (feedback loop 1)	Teachers (course coordinators) trialled the alternative questions, negotiating the meaning, intent, purpose of the questions collaboratively with students to create a sense of learning together for authentic engagement.
Week 6:	Teachers reviewed students' feedback and implemented responsive, timely and meaningful enhancements to the learning, teaching and assessment processes to address the students' learning needs.
Week 6/7:	Teachers facilitated an open dialogue about purposeful and meaningful changes based on students' feedback.
Week 8: (feedback loop 2)	Teachers had the option to use the alternative questions again as a means to encourage critical reflection and foster ongoing open dialogue about how students were engaging in their learning.
Final week(s): (feedback loop 3)	Teachers re-used the alternative questions as part of the practice of a collaborative partnership, where students had the opportunity to reflect on their deeper understanding of the elements of learning, and teachers had the opportunity to raise their awareness of ways to enhance the elements of learning (based on the students' feedback).

Table 1: Student engagement in the change process of evaluating learning and teaching

The involvement and participation stages were intentionally designed to develop a process of student and teacher engagement through a partnership approach that empowered students and teachers as change agents. In particular, students designed an alternative evaluation tool and actively contributed feedback about their learning to solve their learning problems, cultivating a sense of agency and control. Teachers created opportunities for timely, responsive student feedback that fostered open, reflective dialogue to increase students' sense of ownership for learning. Together, teachers and students recognised the power of ongoing, formative feedback to foster students' self-efficacy as change agents in their own learning processes.

Step 3: Partnership

From a theoretical perspective, Healey et al., (2014) affirms that the partnership stage of student engagement reaches beyond the mere consultation, involvement or participation of students in the decision-making. Authentic partnership, based on power equality, embodies learner control. *Students as Partners* scholars (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Healey et al., 2014) characterise learner control as students being given, and taking responsibility for, their own experiences. The learner's locus of control feeds into the concept of autonomy, independence and self-efficacy, which is seen increasingly as central to the process of student engagement that has the potential for transformative learning experiences for all those involved. (Healey et al., 2014; Pauli et al., 2016).

In practice the partnership stage is currently where the University is focussing its energy. The emerging initiative of creating and sustaining a *Students as Partners* mindset to the evaluation of learning and teaching requires a shift in institutional processes and policies that recognise, promote and reward partnership learning communities.

Future work

Importantly, there is not a 'one-size-fits-all' panacea to developing, designing, implementing, and sustaining a *Students as Partners* model. The in-progress design of an alternative student feedback process that espouses a *Students as Partners* mindset needs to start with open dialogue about the meaning and intent of the language of partnership within the University's

culture and context. Embedding a process where students and teachers learn together to foster authentic partnership engagement in the ongoing activities of evaluating learning and teaching will:

- Address student and staff perceptions that the student voice is not valued;
- Address staff perceptions that creative approaches to learning and teaching which foster student partnerships are not recognised or rewarded;
- Create partnership models that embed a culture of trust, respect, and advocacy for raising student voice; and
- Ensure that institutional structures and policies have the flexibility and openness to grow and develop creative partnership ideas.

In recognition of the effort and energy needed to create, embed and sustain shifts in individual and institutional practice, it is natural to ask the question "Is it worth it?" Work from USC's *Students as Partners* project offers compelling evidence that it is. Our students and staff told us that by initiating a culture of student engagement in the evaluation of learning and teaching it:

"allows lecturers to adjust if necessary… gives students a chance to experience the changes…boosts morale…feel heard…contribute to my learning and development by being self-reflective" (student)

"…Nice to know our feedback is being considered, implemented and valued" (student)

"It should be rolled out in every class" (student)

"We [teachers] fostered our own learning community…peer learning, sharing, supporting, and collaborating on our teaching practice" (teacher)

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