Exploring partnership in higher education: policy constructs, staff and student understandings, and the interference of everyday meanings (0148)

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Outline paper

In recent years, both in the UK and internationally, the idea of *partnerships* between staff and students in higher education has 'proliferated in policy and practice' (Healey, Flint and Harrington 2014: 12). References to *partnership* can be found in, for example, a range of national UK policies, manifestos, and frameworks from bodies such as the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), the National Union of Students (NUS), and the Higher Education Academy (HEA). While *partnership* and *partners* appear frequently within learning and teaching discourse, these terms are particularly slippery to define in higher education (Cook-Sather, Bovill and Felten,2014) and there is little consensus on what *partnership* actually is in learning in teaching (Healey *et al*. 2014)

This paper draws on an institutionally-funded project, designed to support multidisciplinary research. This small-scale mixed-method project sought to harness the power of corpus linguistics, i.e. the study of real-life language use through the quantitative analysis of electronically annotated texts (McEnery and Wilson 2004), through the use of corpus-based methods, and to combine these with qualitative interview-based methods more traditionally employed in higher education research. The macro-level quantitative research helps identify the norms against which individual uses must be interpreted (Holmes and Meyerhoff, 2003: 15). The project drew on a range of data sources. Firstly, we established a baseline of common uses of *partnership* in everyday language through the analysis existing large-scale corpora (specifically the BNC and ukWaC), which also helped us to pinpoint specialised uses of the term (e.g. *Limited Liability Partnership* or *LLP*). Secondly, we analysed a specialised web-based corpus limited to academic webpages to provide a more focussed insight into how the word is used within the specific context of academia. Thirdly, we explored how the term *partnership* was used within higher education through: the analysis of six focus group interviews with university staff and students; in-depth interviews with two 'key informants' with expertise in pedagogic partnerships; and analysis of key policies and guidance documents on teaching and learning partnerships in the UK.

Using these different sources for data and both qualitative and quantitative methods for analysis, the discursive profile of *partnership* in everyday use was established and compared with how it is used within higher education, how it is understood by staff and students, the specialised uses of *partnership* that inform students' and staff's understanding of the term, and finally the key motifs and rhetorical devices associated with the term. Key findings included:

- The slipperiness of the term *partnership*. While key informants and guidance documentation focussed on the values associated with *partnership* learning, university staff and students had narrower definitions associated with 'working together', 'collaboration', and 'student representation'. Equally important was the emphasis on business and law-influenced associations, e.g. 'business partnership' and 'contract', which also reflected usage in the large-scale corpora.

- The range of partnerships that exist within higher education settings. An in-depth analyses of sample concordance lines from the specialised corpus to explore who was involved in the partnership (e.g. *partnership between X and Y*) showed that partnerships can exist between universities, university and industry, university and local authority, university and schools, amongst others. The focus group interviews also highlighted different actors: university and schools, university staff and senior management, university and collaborative partners. Partnerships between staff and students, while recognised by some, were perceived to be more problematic due to power differentials, inclusivity, and complicating factors including assessment and the payment of high tuition fees.

- The influence of power was also apparent in the use of the adjective *equal* to describe *partnership*. Corpus analysis shows that *equal* and *partnership* do collocate in some contexts. During the focus group and key informant interviews, the participants struggled with the notion of equality in staff-student partnerships, recognising that people brought different expertise, motivations, and expectations to the relationship. Role identity, hierarchy, confidence, time and commitment were seen as challenges to effective partnership working.

- The appropriateness of the term *partnership* to define more respectful, reciprocal, and responsible (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2014) relationships, i.e. 'what is it believed that it [the term *partnership*] is going to do that you can't do without using it' (focus group interview). Using the thesaurus function in the analysis of the large-scale corpora showed that the words *collaboration*, *relationship* and *co-operation* behave similarly to *partnership*. While the key informants could articulate the differences between *collaboration* and *partnership*, within the focus groups the terms were used almost interchangeably.

- The contradictions between the rationale for use of the term partnership as 'a valuable alternative to the rhetoric of consumerism' (NUS) and its associations with commercial and managerial discourses. The everyday understanding of partnership as a business term, combined with the belief that *partnership* is a term associated with the 'gobbledegook of management' (focus group interview) meant that on occasion the term *partnership* was not used because 'people did not want to have anything to do with it' (key informant interview).

These findings suggest that while the term *partnership* is broad and can be interpreted by different disciplines to describe different kinds of relationship between staff and students, there is also the possibility that the positive definitions associated with the concept of *pedagogic partnerships*, built on values such as community, challenge, trust, authenticity and responsibility (see, e.g. HEA) will be over-ridden by the meanings that are more closely connected with everyday understandings of the term. The dominance of business and legal discourse associated with *partnership* in everyday language might well taint the more mutually enriching relationship that proponents of learning and teaching partnerships propound.

References

Cook-Sather, A.; Bovill, C.; & Felten, P. (2014) *Engaging students as partners in learning and teaching: a guide for faculty*, San Francisco: Jossey Bass

Healey, M.; Flint, A. & Harrington, K. (2014) *Engagement through partnership: students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education*, York: Higher Education Academy

Holmes, J. & M. Meyerhoff (2003) Different voices, different views: An introduction to current research in language and gender. In J. Holmes and M. Meyerhoff (eds) *The Handbook of Language and Gender*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1-17

McEnery, A. & Wilson, A. (2004) *Corpus linguistics*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press

Policy documents

HEA: *Framework for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, available online at: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/students-partners-framework-action

NUS: *A Manifesto for Partnership*, available online at: http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/a-manifesto-for-partnership

QAA: *UK Quality Code for Higher Education - Chapter B5: Student engagement*, available online at: http://www.qaa.ac.uk/publications/information-and-guidance/uk-quality-code-for-higher-education-chapter-b5-student-engagement#.V182MeQYHOs