

Belong with, not to: cultivation of student belonging through student-staff partnership

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

Students-as-partners (SaP) approach provides a powerful means to cultivate student sense of belonging with fellow students and staff. This counters a consumerist delivery-focused culture that has developed in modern higher education. In the context of distance learning, at the Open University, virtual internships for students provide opportunities to engage as scholarship partners with staff. Here we report on a SAP project in which two students from under represented groups engaged in scholarship of inclusive practice in distance learning. The project findings suggest that, when power dynamics are explicitly addressed within student-staff teams, students develop agency, identity and a sense of belonging 'with' rather than passively belonging 'to'.

Full paper

Introduction

Within higher education, students as partners (SaP) operates as a counter-narrative to a consumer model and to the traditional hierarchy of teacher-student model (Matthews, 2018). Partnerships are a powerful mechanism to cultivate belonging among students and staff:

*'pedagogical partnership can foster in students a **sense of belonging**, support faculty in generative reflection, and contribute to the evolution of an institution into a place where members of the community feel a meaningful connection'*. Cook-Sather, Bahti and Ntem (2019)

This "belonging with," rather than "belonging to," is borne from active collaboration and shared responsibility eroding hierarchies and recreating the institution as shared space of connected learning. As 'students often lack agency and voice' (Mann, 2008 as cited in Bovill et al 2016), there is an imperative to invest time and build structures where students develop confidence in using their voice. SaP initiatives can actively create spaces where students develop confidence in using their voices and become agents of their own learning (Shank and Cruz, 2023). However, for real student agency equitable partnerships are essential (e.g., Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten, 2014). Power dynamics and inequalities inherent in the academic environment can impede genuine partnership and inclusivity. Power dynamics and inequalities inherent in the academic environment can impede genuine partnership and inclusivity.

Methods

Following advertisement for interns, two student interns were appointed to work as scholarship partners in development of an inclusive learner community within the 'BUD' project. They acted as 'buddies' in student asynchronous online discussion forums (ODFs) of Open University Access modules. They provided lived experience from identities of Black ethnicity and neurodivergence, specifically autism. Both were carers. Our BUD interns were engaged to act primarily as consultants and co-researchers. Following discussion as to whether a person could be expected to represent the diverse people that may be autistic, Black or both, it was agreed that BUD interns were explicitly not representatives. Their lived experiences informed their roles as consultants and were lenses through which they contributed as co-researchers.

Power relationships were explicitly considered and addressed within the project, beginning with fair payment for interns as a means to demonstrate, and ethically deliver, tangible parity of value for student lived experience and staff professional / lived experience. Recognising that 'students often lack agency and voice' (Mann, 2008 as cited in Bovill et al 2016), students met weekly on a one-to-one with the project lead and the project team was kept to six people in to ensure that student voice would not be drowned by multiple staff voices. Communication tools and strategies were adopted according to the preferences of each student. Although the project was well outlined before interns took up their roles, flexibility was retained to ensure that interns could shape activities, priorities, and final outputs.

To evaluate our students-as-partners approach and intern gains, each intern wrote a short reflective 'blog'. Our interns' reflections provide evidence of potentially transformative strength in student engagement. The sense of belonging and developing multiple identities at the same time came out strongly. One articulated a developing empowered **sense of belonging** as a student partner in shared enterprise for improved student experience:

Essentially you are engaging with both worlds of the Open University and interlinking them to bring forward ideas and recommendations to make students experiences better.

A developed sense of belonging was expressed in the context of making a contribution for students who struggle to be heard.

..it felt very rewarding to be able to lend an empathetic ear to those who may have felt unseen or potentially isolated within the student community.

One student proposed a review of literature and published guidance on support for autistic students in Higher Education. She delivered a set of recommendations weaving of her lived experiences into the broader context of current sectoral practice. She demonstrated growth in agency and in self-efficacy with regard to research activity and her personally unanticipated growth in self-awareness.

"my independent research .. has proven itself to be a deeply personal, formative, and fascinating undertaking."

“as I identified with clusters of Autistic ‘traits’ in academic literature, that I had previously dismissed in contrast with the severity of my sibling’s Autism, was self-affirming.”

Conclusion

The BUD project contributes evidence that: student partners can develop their sense of belonging within the context of a well-supported staff-student scholarship project. Equity demands a sustainable approach to internship provision and explicit consideration of the power dynamics in partnerships. Maximal gains in distance learning and student experience are achieved when students belong “with” staff and one another rather than belong “to” an institution.

References

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