

Partnership Learning Communities

Flint Abbi, *Higher Education Academy, UK*

Abstract

This paper will draw together aspects of theory, underpinned by published examples and evidence from practice, to develop a new way of framing community in learning teaching, which embraces the notion of engagement through partnership. This notion of 'partnership learning community' is central to a recently published Higher Education Academy conceptual model and framework for partnership with and between students in learning and teaching in higher education (AUTHOR). By synthesising aspects of the scholarship of both partnership and community, this may facilitate an approach to student engagement that accommodates the plurality of perspectives and diversity of staff and students working and learning within higher education. This focus also identifies a number of fundamental challenges and tensions at the heart of learning and teaching in the 21st century.

Outline

This paper explores the connections between scholarship and theories of student engagement, partnership and community to develop a new lens through which to explore the sustained engagement of students with their learning and the enhancement of their learning and teaching experiences: partnership learning communities.

The scholarly field of student engagement is rich and varied, and there are a wealth of different perspectives and approaches (e.g. Dunne and Owen 2013; Bryson 2014; Nygaard *et al.* 2013; Kahu 2013; Trowler and Trowler 2010). In recent years there has been an increased focus on partnership as a way of framing learning and quality enhancement relationships between students and their institutions (AUTHOR). For example within the national contexts of the UK, partnership has become part of policy and quality discourse (QAA 2012; NUS 2012; sparqs 2012; WISE 2014). There is also burgeoning evidence that partnership is an effective way of engaging students with learning and research (e.g. Neary and Winn 2009), and in the design and enhancement of learning, teaching and assessment (e.g. Cook-Sather, Bovill and Felten 2014). In this paper partnership is seen as a specific form of student engagement which involves high levels of active student (and staff) participation.

Student engagement and community are closely aligned and mutually reinforcing concepts: strategies to increase student engagement often foster a greater sense of belonging (Thomas 2012). Engagement within a community is critical to many evidenced practices that enhance student engagement with their learning. Kuh's (2008) 'High Impact Learning Activities' include collaborative assignments and projects, common intellectual experiences and the development of learning communities. Chickering and Gamson (1987) identify co-operation and reciprocity among students, the encouragement of interactions between staff and students as two of their seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education. Coates (2007) also notes the importance of a university environment that supports and legitimises students to their engagement. These features align well with models of community. For example, there are connections with various sub-elements of McMillan and Chavis (1986) four element model of belonging, including: the emotional safety required for membership; the sense of integration required for reinforcement; and, the high quality interactions and shared experience of events required to develop shared

emotional connections. Community is recognised as key to student retention and success, particularly where it focuses on developing a sense of belonging in the academic sphere (Thomas 2012).

Models of community most often employed within learning and teaching in HE tend to focus on social learning, and include communities of practices (Wenger 2001) and learning communities (Price 2003). Learning communities tend to focus on students' academic and social engagement and usually involve a specified group of students sharing learning experiences through studying together and meeting regularly to make connections across the different modules they are studying (Love 2012). The benefits of participating in learning communities range from deeper engagement and investment in learning, the development of high-level academic skills, greater academic success and employability (Tinto 2003; Price 2005; Zhao and Kuh 2004). Communities of practice recognise that community develops where individuals share a common aim or endeavour over a sustained period of time (Wenger 2001). Explorations of communities of practice in learning and teaching in higher education have tended to focus on staff. The benefits associated with engagement in these communities include openness to curriculum renewal and different pedagogic approaches, a greater appreciation of multi-disciplinary perspectives, and the development of teaching approaches that accommodate diversity (Cox 2004).

However, where staff and students learn and work together through learning communities and communities of practice, traditional hierarchical relationships often persist, and the concept of partnership has yet to be fully realised. Staff roles in learning communities tend to be as developers of content and pedagogy and as managers of the learning process (Tinto 2003). Some authors have suggested that by focusing specifically on building community among students, learning communities may widen the division between staff and students (Beachboard, Beachboard and Adkinson 2011). Similarly, some have argued that the predominant focus on staff in communities of practice may mean that when students are brought into these communities they are framed as novices to be acculturated (Lea 2005).

The literature on partnership in higher education suggests it is encouraged by structures and working arrangements, shared values, and attitudes and behaviours that each partners sign up to and embodies in practice. Working arrangements often require the dispersal of power (Little *et al.* 2011; NUS 2012) and joint decision-making processes (Williamson 2013), and are underpinned by values such as respect, reciprocity and responsibility (Cook-Sather, Bovill and Felten 2014). These values are embodied in practice through recognising the different contribution partners make (Williamson 2013) and a willingness to meet others "where they are" (Powers 2012). Partnership does not imply that all parties are the same (Cook-Sather, Bovill and Felten 2014) it is about equality of value and opportunity, but at the same time recognising and appreciation of the diversity of unique perspectives, experiences and expertise each party brings.

By drawing together complementary scholarship around both community and partnership, a new framing for community emerges, which foregrounds partnership among students and between students and staff. Exploring this notion of *partnership learning communities* and the proposed values which underpin them - authenticity, inclusivity, reciprocity, empowerment, trust, challenge, community and responsibility

(HEA 2014) - highlights some of the key tensions and challenges of student engagement. These include issues of power relationships, identity, reward and recognition, sustainability, and inclusivity and scale (AUTHOR). Deeper scholarly consideration of these issues is important for two reasons. Firstly, it contributes to the call for more rigorous and critical study of student engagement (Fielding 2004) and begins to unpick some aspects of student engagement which have, as yet, received little scholarly attention. See, for example work by Taylor and Robinson on theorising power within student voice (2009) and developing ethical frameworks for student engagement (2014). It also helps to challenge discourses of student engagement which frame students as homogenous, and begins to take a more nuanced view of the diversity and plurality of perspectives, experience and expertise among student and staff. See, for example, Cook-Sather's (forthcoming) work on acknowledging and seeking connections across difference in staff and student partnerships. As such, these tensions and challenges are not unique to thinking about partnership and community – they sit at the heart of 21st century learning and teaching in higher education.

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