

Partnership as non-compliance? Does 'partnership learning' create a space of meaningful engagement within the neoliberal university? (0241)

Sarah Dyer

University of Exeter, UK

Neoliberal reforms have reconfigured UK higher education (HE); its assumed purpose and its structures. Universities have become key institutions in delivering 'competitive advantage' in a 'global knowledge economy' ([Powell and Snellman 2004](#); [Olssen and Peters 2005](#)). Reforms have created a mass education system in which costs are individualised and accountability is rendered through 'quantifiable output measures' in a quasi-market. These reforms create a requirement for innovation in teaching and learning as higher education is 'massified' beyond the point at which it is possible to scale the practices of elite education. Reforms purport to create conditions that will reward those innovations which lead to good education.

The concept of partnership provides a focus for some academic staff who wish to undertake innovative emancipatory educational practice. Cook-Sather ([2014](#)), as one proponent, describes partnership as a threshold concept in learning: troublesome, transformative, and irreversible. Partnership acknowledges developments in our understandings of learning, including the political significance of 'shared investigation' ([Freire 1970/1993](#)) and 'communities of practice' ([Wenger 1998](#)). Partnership learning, it is argued, creates alternative roles for staff and students and understandings of learning, to those of students as "passive" consumers of education (neoliberal) or novices being encultured into the academic community (elite) (Healy et al 2014: 26).

Healey et al ([2014: 7](#)) characterise engaging staff and student "effectively as partners in teaching and learning" as "arguably one of the most important issues facing higher education in the 21st century". In 2014 the Higher Education Academy (HEA) published a framework for partnership learning ([The Higher Education Academy 2014](#)). The HEA positions the framework as a means by which new understandings of teaching and learning in the contemporary university (what it looks like, what it requires and what it aims at) will lead to innovation. At the centre of the framework is the notion of the partnership learning community, which should provide a "focus for developing deep partnership in practice" (Healy et al 2014: 26) and "facilitate deep connections between staff and students and lead to enhanced learning and innovation for all community members" (Healy et al 2014: 28).

Although offered as an alternative to elite education, partnership has much in common with it. Trow ([2007: 248](#)) characterises elite education as involving "a certain kind of relation between teachers and students within a community of scholars" (248); "relationships are broad rather than narrow; the teachers are concerned with the values and character of the students; teachers and students often meet outside the setting of formal instruction" (249). This is education "carried on through a relatively close and prolonged relationship between students and teacher, and depends on the creation and maintenance of settings within which a relationship can exist" (250). At the time of the Robbins report a staff to student ratio of one to eight was seen as a norm (and this continued to the 1980s) (Anderson

2010, n.p.). In a mass education system, with large cohorts and high staff-student ratios, it can no longer be assumed that teaching and learning is the natural upshot of extended contact between academics and students. Given that massification is a process whereby the elite education model is no longer viable, it is important to ask about the possibilities for partnership within mass education – what is required for it to be possible.

‘Partnership learning’ should also focus our attention on those academic staff who are required to undertake partnership. Discussions of student engagement have tended to focus on academics only in relation to the question of what makes a good teacher, without addressing the fact that neoliberal reform of the university has changed the nature of the academic workforce enormously. This is a significant oversight. If these reforms have led to an expansion of student numbers they have conversely led to a relative contraction of academics on traditional/standard employment contracts. There has been both a rise in casualisation of the academic workforce ([Bauder 2006](#); [Purcell 2007](#)) and a ‘unbundling’ of academic roles ([Locke 2014](#)). Undergraduates are increasingly likely to be taught by academics who are not themselves members of a university community in any traditional sense. This paper addresses a gap in previous framings of student engagement by foregrounding in its analysis neoliberal reforms of academic labour.

This paper asks about the possibilities for, and constraints on, partnership using analysis of interviews with 34 people involved in partnership learning. Academics, professional service staff, student union staff, and students from five Universities from across the UK took part in the research: Birmingham City University, University of Edinburgh, Keele University, Manchester Metropolitan University, and University of Exeter. The interviewees represented a wide variety of experience and a wealth of expertise. Their partnerships included academics and students, student peer learning, HEIs and student associations as well as partnerships with industry, communities, and other institutions (public and third sector). Some of the partnerships were relatively new, others long running (10+ years). Some of the partnerships were within credit-bearing modules, some were in preparation for such modules, and still others existed as extra-curricular. The interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and were recorded with consent. The research was reviewed and approved by a University of Exeter’s Ethics Committee.

Analysis of the interview data has three points of focus. First, in the light of neoliberal reframing of higher education, it focuses on participants’ normative framings of higher education, the University, and partnership. Secondly, it draws out notions of innovation, in particular concerning risk taking and creativity, in learning and teaching. The final focus is on the notions of accountability at work in interviewees’ accounts, in particular competing ideas of professional and consumer accountability. Analysis of this empirical data is used to inform our understandings of the practice of partnership learning and the extent to which it conforms or challenges neoliberal reforms in UK higher education.

Bauder, H. (2006). "The segmentation of academic labour: A Canadian example." *ACME* 4(2): 228-239.

- Cook-Sather, A. (2014). "Student-faculty partnership in explorations of pedagogical practice: a threshold concept in academic development." International Journal for Academic Development **19**(3): 186-198.
- Freire, P. (1970/1993). Pedagogy of the oppressed. London Penguin.
- Healey, M., A. Flint, et al. (2014). Engagement through partnership: students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education. York, The Higher Education Academy.
- Locke, W. (2014). Shifting academic careers: implications for enhancing professionalism in teaching and supporting learning, Higher Education Academy.
- Olssen, M. and M. A. Peters (2005). "Neoliberalism, higher education and the knowledge economy: From the free market to knowledge capitalism." Journal of Education Policy **20**(3): 313-345.
- Powell, W. W. and K. Snellman (2004). "The knowledge economy." Annual Review of Sociology **30**: 199-220.
- Purcell, M. (2007). "'Skilled, cheap, and desperate": Non-tenure-track faculty and the delusion of meritocracy." Antipode **39**(1): 121-143.
- The Higher Education Academy (2014). Framework for partnership in learning and teaching in higher education. York, The Higher Education Academy.
- Trow, M. (2007). Reflection on the transition from elite to mass to universal access: forms and phases of higher education in modern societies since WWII. International Handbook of Higher Education. J. Forest and P. Altbach. Dordrecht, Netherlands, Springer.
- Wenger, E. (1998). Communities of practice: learning, meaning, and identity. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.