Matters of Concern: Developing an Ethical Framework for Student Engagement through Partnership (0359)

Carol Taylor
Sheffield Hallam University, UK

Abstract

Ethical issues are part of the lived experience of student partnership work but are rarely or explicitly brought to the fore. Drawing on recent work, the paper outlines a conceptual framework for the consideration of ethics in student partnership and discusses a range of tools to prompt reflexivity on the ethical problematics of doing partnership in practice (Author, 2015; HEA, 2015; Healey, Flint and Harrington, 2014). The paper is grounded in Sayer's (2011) view that our relation to the world and to others is one of concern, and proposes an ethics *for* partnership in which paying attention to what matters and what concerns us is as important as what 'works'. It considers the enactment of values underpinning partnership practices; explores partnership as a matter of reciprocity and relationality to enhance learning and teaching in mutually beneficial ways; and looks at ethical issues around inequalities, power, difference and dissensus in partnership.

Paper

The purpose of this paper is open a conversation about ethics in theory and practice in student partnership work, to explore the current 'state of play' on ethics and partnership, and to consider ideas for taking this aspect of partnership work forward.

The paper is motivated by Healey, Flint and Harrington's (2014: 11) point that developing an ethical framework for student engagement through partnership in learning and teaching is a key priority. In response to this point – and as a means of prompting debate about this emerging field of theory and practice – the paper proposes a conceptual framework for the consideration of ethical issues in student partnership work and invites discussion of a range of tools to prompt reflexivity on the ethical problematics of partnership work in practice. The paper is based on work commissioned by the HEA (Author, 2015), which builds, conceptually and practically, on the set of values identified in the *Framework for partnership in learning and teaching in higher education* (HEA, 2014), on Healey, Flint and Harrington's (2014) model of engagement through partnership, and on other emergent theorisations of ethics and student engagement (Taylor and Robinson, 2014).

The paper addresses the central question: Why take ethics into account in engagement through partnership work? It explores this question via a consideration of partnership as ethos not outcome to extend understandings of ethics and partnership. By considering partnership as both a key site of innovative and potentially transformative practice in learning and teaching, i.e. its key impulses are that all parties benefit and that partnership promotes learning gain for all, and as a problematic opportunity space, i.e. in that those benefits are sometimes unequally distributed and there is no

easy conception of or straightforward route to learning gain, the paper opens up the messy complexity of putting ethics into action in partnership practices.

In addition, participation in partnership is underpinned by values grounded in dialogue, trust and authenticity but these values are not always easy to practice and maintain, given entrenched power hierarchies in teaching and learning and the inertia that comes with working within the neoliberal contexts of the contemporary university. While engagement through partnership aims (rightly) to disrupt these hierarchies and shift the inertia, a focus on ethics shows the tensions this can give rise to in practice. Considering ethics, therefore, draws attention to the fact that relationality is not always easy; what is meant by 'empowerment' is contested; and who stands to gain (and how) may be as much intangible and affective as practical and sustainable.

The paper considers two major ways of thinking about ethics: deontological and consequentialist ethics and interrogates these in relation to what they have to offer for developing an ethical framework for the practice and theory of partnership. It proposes a framework for ethics and partnership drawn from descriptive ethics (Mautner, 2000), which seeks to apply social science understanding to the analysis of ethics. Descriptive ethics contests the notion that ethics have substantive 'content' whether that derives from institutional ethics review boards or a set of universal 'rational' principles or a set of known and tried generalised solutions which can prescribed by ethics experts. It focuses instead on ethics as process and enactment. This approach refocuses attention on how ethical issues are matters of concern which are intimately entwined within everyday decisions and interactions that inform partnership. From this, the paper moves to an exploration of relational ethics arising from the work of Buber (1937). Aristotle's (1953) concept of *phronesis*, or 'practical wisdom', is considered as a means for making partnership ethics practical. *Phronesis*, it is argued, provides a basis for *doing* partnership as a form of virtue ethics in which ethical integrity is enacted in everyday activities.

The paper ends with the proposal for a *bricolage* approach to ethics which brings these differing approaches to ethics together and enables the development of a process ethics framework for partnership. Process ethics, I argue, needs to be situated at the heart of student partnership practices because ethics in partnership is ethics-in-action. That is, acting ethically is not an achieved state, but a continuing and reflexive struggle to establish, maintain and sustain partnership learning communities through mutual care and responsibility in ways which recognizes the value of dissensus and difference alongside those of plurality and inclusivity (Author, 2015).

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