Conceptions of student-staff partnership among academics at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, in relation to the research-teaching nexus

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Abstract

This paper details the qualitatively different ways in which academics at Mary Immaculate College (MIC), Limerick, understand and experience the concept of students as partners in learning, teaching and research, since student-staff partnership(s) can offer fresh ways of thinking about the research-teaching relation.

A purposive sample of 12 staff members from the College's Faculty of Arts and Faculty of Education participated in the study and data were gathered through semi-structured interviews. The findings indicate that MIC academics experience the research-teaching nexus in three qualitatively different ways that increase in complexity and breadth of awareness across three categories (A−C) of description: Staff members in Category A connect research and teaching to a limited extent at undergraduate level; Category B academics regularly bring research and teaching together to the benefit of curricula and student learning at undergraduate and postgraduate levels; while Category C participants, who regard themselves for the most part as fellow inquirers with students in a partnership learning community, promote rich interconnections between research and teaching.

In line with recent research that encourages a rethinking of the research-teaching nexus through the lens of student-staff partnership, the paper's findings point to the benefits of involving students as partners in learning, teaching and research. Nevertheless, in view of the fact that collaboration with students can be challenging, mainly due to power issues and the language used to describe partnership, higher educators wishing to engage meaningfully in student-staff partnership are advised to start small.

Keywords

1. Introduction

This paper reports on one aspect of a phenomenographic study that investigated the qualitatively different ways in which academics at Mary Immaculate College (MIC), Limerick, experience the links between research and teaching. As part of the investigation, participants' understanding of the concept of students as partners (SaP) in learning, teaching and research was explored, as student-staff partnership can offer fresh ways of thinking about the research-teaching relation. That is to say, examining ways in which students can be engaged as partners in learning, teaching and research can promote thinking about ways in which research and teaching might be linked in higher education. And a mutually beneficial relationship between expressions of, and processes associated with, both student-staff partnership and the research-teaching relation can only serve what is regarded in the literature as an important goal of higher education, namely the development of inclusive, scholarly, knowledge-building communities (Brew, 2006).

2. Literature Review

Because of its potential to contribute to the creation of more egalitarian institutions (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017; Matthews, Cook-Sather, & Healey, 2018), promote student engagement (Bovill & Felten, 2016; Crawford, Horsley, Hagyard, & Derricott, 2015; Curran, 2017; Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014; Higher Education Academy, 2015; Higher Education Authority, 2016), bring research and teaching closer together (Dickerson, Jarvis, & Stockwell, 2016; Levy, Little, & Whelan, 2011; Manning, Willcoxson, Gething, & Johnston, 2011; Matthews, Cook-Sather, & Healey, 2018; Tong, 2018; Wuetherick & McLaughlin, 2011), and push back against the neoliberal model of students as consumers (Gravett, Kinchin, & Winstone, 2019; Marquis, Black, & Healey, 2017; Marquis, Power, & Yin, 2018; Matthews, Cook-Sather, Acai, et al., 2018; Matthews, Dwyer, Russell, & Enright, 2018), the concept of students as partners has gained much traction in higher education in recent years, particularly in North America, the UK, and Australia. Moreover, Sambell, Brown, and Graham (2017) have identified both the notion of students as peers and partners and "the better alignment of research and teaching" (p. 6) as two of six teaching-and-

learning-related trends (see also Marie, 2018) aimed at bringing about clear improvements to student learning in higher education.

Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2014) observe that the students-as-partners concept "interweaves through many other debates" (p. 12) in higher education, including that concerning the linking of research and teaching. In the same way as there should ideally, according to many academics, be a two-way relationship between research and teaching, so should there be a mutually beneficial relationship between student-staff partnership and the research-teaching nexus. This synergy is captured in two remarks from contributory chapters to Little's (2011) volume: Levy, Little, and Whelan (2011) suggest that "new perspectives on staff-student partnership are also emerging from ongoing re-thinking of the 'research-teaching nexus' in HE" (p. 3), while Wuetherick and McLaughlin (2011) comment that "one of the motivations for bringing teaching and research closer together can and should be the importance of staff-student partnerships in higher education" (p. 188).

A variety of definitions of student-staff partnership already exist in what is still an emerging field of inquiry in higher education. This is not surprising, as "partnership" itself is "a slippery term to define" (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014, p. 6). One early, concise definition, that of Levy et al. (2011), sees partnership as implying "shared responsibility and cooperative or collaborative action, in relation to shared purposes" (p. 1). Shared responsibility, collaboration, reciprocity, relationship, and active engagement also feature in two frequently-cited definitions of student-staff partnership, by Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten (2014) and Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2014). Cook-Sather et al. see student-staff partnership as

> a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision-making, implementation, investigation, or analysis. (pp. 6−7)

The same authors stress that this definition positions both students and faculty members as learners and teachers, and their characterisation is also sufficiently broad to embrace potential partnerships in learning, teaching and assessment; subject-based research and inquiry (including pedagogical research); and curriculum development (Matthews, 2017). Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2014) also take a wide and

distinctly process-oriented view of partnership, situating the concept within the domain of student engagement:

> Partnership is . . . a relationship in which all involved – students, academics, professional services staff, senior managers, students' unions, and so on – are actively engaged in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together. Partnership is essentially a process of engagement, not a product. It is a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself. (p. 12)

With their clear espousal of equality of contribution and parity of esteem, these definitions confront "traditional assumptions about the identities of, and relationships between, learners and teachers" (Matthews, 2017, p. 1; see also Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2016). And while encompassing an array of practices and possibilities, SaP, for Matthews, Cook-Sather, Acai, et al. (2018) as for Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2014), is essentially about the relationships between learners and teachers—relationships "underpinned by particular principles and values" (Matthews, Cook-Sather, Acai, et al., 2018, p. 2). Regarding the latter, Cook-Sather et al. (2014) identify three guiding principles or criteria for staff-student partnerships: respect, reciprocity, and responsibility—all three of which "require and inspire trust, attention, and responsiveness" (p. 2). Two of these principles also find a place among the values that Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2014), drawing on scholarly literature in relation to partnership and student engagement, associate with partnership in practice: authenticity, inclusivity, reciprocity, empowerment, trust, responsibility, honesty, courage, plurality, challenge, and community (see also Higher Education Academy, 2014, 2015).

3. Methodology

The methodology adopted in this study—phenomenography—is a qualitative research approach that explores variation in people's understanding and experience of a specific phenomenon at a particular time. This approach has been widely used to investigate the varied understandings within higher education of such concepts as curriculum (Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006), teaching (Prosser & Trigwell, 1997), research (Åkerlind, 2005b; Brew, 2001), and the research-teaching relationship (Robertson & Bond, 2001; Robertson, 2007; Trigwell & Prosser, 2009). Analysis of the data in a phenomenographic study leads to the creation of a set of unique categories that

describe the variation in participants' understanding of the phenomenon/phenomena being explored. The ordering of these categories of description so that there is a logical relationship between them produces a complex known as an outcome space. This can be represented in either prose or graphic form, or both. Åkerlind, Bowden, and Green (2005) acknowledge that, in practice, "most outcome spaces show some form of hierarchical relationships among categories" (p. 95), where some categories are inclusive of others. While an outcome space will inevitably be partial as regards the entire possible range of ways in which a phenomenon might be experienced, it should, ideally, represent comprehensively a particular participant group's experience of a phenomenon at a particular point in time (Åkerlind, 2005a).

A purposive sample of 12 staff members from Mary Immaculate College's Faculty of Arts and Faculty of Education (see Table 1 below)—all active researchers with teaching experience ranging from five to 25 years—participated in the study and data were gathered through semi-structured interviews during the period February−April 2019.

Participant (pseudonym)	Faculty	Discipline/Department	Years working in HE
Alison	Education	STEM Education	18
Brian	Education	Reflective Pedagogy	12
Cathy	Education	Religious Education	25
Denis	Arts	English Language & Literature	21
Evan	Arts	History	25
Frank	Arts	Drama & Theatre Studies	21
Grace	Education	Music Education	10
Harry	Arts	Philosophy	13
Ivan	Arts	Geography	12
Jessica	Arts	Linguistics	15
Kenneth	Arts	Psychology	6
Lucy	Education	Educational Research Methods	5

Table 1 − Summary participant profiles

Analysis of the data began with repeated readings of the transcripts. Extracts were then compared and grouped in an iterative process until the variation across transcripts (treated as one text) had been fairly represented and categories of description had been identified and ordered to produce an outcome space. Analysis of

the data involved identifying and grouping significant quotes from the 12 transcripts until I had established three provisional, distinct categories of description. And even though the final number of categories remained at three, I made numerous adjustments to them to stabilise them, reassigning quotes between categories so that variation was maximised.

4. Findings & Discussion

Throughout this section, extracts from interview transcripts (referenced by participant pseudonym and transcript page number) are used to draw attention to one or more key characteristics of each phenomenographic category and to support claims that I make regarding the findings. Participating academics in the study were found to experience the nexus between research and teaching in three qualitatively different, progressively complex, ways:

A. Teaching and research are linked to a limited extent at undergraduate level
B. Teaching and research are routinely linked to the benefit of undergraduate and postgraduate curricula and student learning
C. Teaching and research are richly interconnected activities within a partnership learning community

All of the participants expressed interest in the concept of students as partners, even if they believe that their current practice does not realise the concept, that genuine partnership with students is problematic and difficult to achieve, or if they are unsure about how student-staff partnership might advance research-teaching links.

While academics in Category A may express interest in exploring further the notion of students as partners in learning and teaching, subject-based research, and curriculum development, the concept, for them, is clearly at odds with traditional assumptions about classroom identities and relationships and with their own current practice:

> To move on to where you're actually working with students in partnership from a teaching-research perspective: That, for me, would be a whole next level. . . . I think it could be transformative for both staff and students. We'd want to be able to work towards it. (Grace, p. 17)

Category A interviewees' view of partnership is succinctly captured by Ivan: "I really like the idea of students as partners. . . . I'd like to see how we could initiate it (Ivan,

p. 18). Participants in this category are especially interested in the notion of undergraduate students being involved as change agents in the re-design of curricula—"a radical but very interesting process" (Denis, p. 17). In relation to partnering with students in subject-based research (see Figure 2.4), Faculty of Arts academics in Category A are reluctant to co-write with postgraduates, as co-authoring "isn't the done thing" (Evan, p. 17) in their discipline. Evan, for example, sees such an approach to writing as being "born out of a social science model that doesn't apply in a humanities discipline like history" (p. 18).

For participants in Category B, partnership with students may by now be a reality at some level. Members of the Faculty of Arts in this category, for example, claim to experience partnership when supervising undergraduate and postgraduate dissertations. The category also includes faculty members who, despite partnering already perhaps with students to some extent and believing that the notion of student-staff partnership is a very welcome development, are alert to the danger of engaging students in tokenistic rather than meaningful partnerships:

> My worry is that it's been misappropriated and taken as a tick-the-box mechanism, where people can say, 'Well I have students as partners in my research.' I think it's a wonderful concept, but I think it needs to be teased out and explained very clearly. (Brian, p. 11)

Challenges regarding student-staff partnerships have already been identified by Cook-Sather et al. (2014) and include the issue of power and the language used to describe partnership. Regarding power issues, participants in the present study noted the need for faculty to give careful thought to the question of who is "driving the process" (Denis, p. 20) of student-staff partnership. Academics in Category B are heedful, too, of the fact that partnership with students in learning, teaching and research can give rise to "power imbalance and exploitation" (Cathy, p. 15) as well as the "subjugation of voices" (Frank, p. 19). Grace expresses concisely the power-related concerns of participants in regard to partnering with students:

> There's already a power imbalance that you cannot get away from no matter how hard you try. That's not an equal partnership; it's never going to be equal. So then, could you claim it to be a partnership? Possibly you can, but I'm saying it's problematic. (Grace, p. 14)

Even words and phrases like "partnership" and "students as partners" are themselves viewed as problematic by some Category B interviewees, as they can be "misconstrued under a neoliberal agenda" (Brian, p. 9) and suggest that academics are "buying into some notion of customers, service providers" (Denis, p. 15). The same terms are also "bandied about" (Denis, p. 15; Lucy, p. 21) as if "we're all in this together" (Denis, p. 15), without any grasp of "who takes responsibility for what needs to be learned, or how we learn, or how we go" (Brian, p. 10). Broadening out from the issue of terms, moreover, we see that Category B staff members' own use of language in discussing student-staff partnerships reveals that they have not fully embraced the principle of reciprocity (Cook-Sather et al., 2014), one aspect of which is that, in collaborating with students in learning, teaching and research, academics stand to learn as much as their student partners:

> I think there are great opportunities for students to learn from being partners in research. And I think that idea of joining in a project that's happening or going on is a great thing for them. (Alison, p. 13)

Alison's focus here is solely on what students learn from their involvement in partnership with staff, but the idea of such collaboration positioning both students and faculty members as learners and teachers (Cook-Sather et al., 2014) is marginal in her awareness.

Academics in Category C, finally, collaborate with students in learning, teaching, and research at undergraduate and postgraduate levels in ways that significantly promote among students a sense of belonging to a knowledge-building community of practice:

> I think the thing that's unique about STER [Student Teacher Educational Research—an annual conference and online journal] is that it's run by students. I wanted all of the decisions to be made by myself working in partnership with students. (Lucy, p. 19)

For Cathy, who teaches religious education, engaging students as co-learners and collaborators in the scholarship of discovery is possible as early as the first year of an undergraduate programme:

> My first years in the undergraduates, I learn so much from those students. They're like 500 amazing researchers. . . . I read 500 papers, and my goodness

me, what I learn from those students! And I then feed it back to them, so that, at a very simple level, their assessment is, I see it as a kind of collaborative, they're giving me in-service the whole time. . . . I'd love to co-write with undergraduate students. (Cathy, pp. 11−12, 14)

In Category C, we witness a qualitative shift in the understanding of partnership. Interviewees in this category perceive partnership primarily as a relationship underpinned by genuine dialogue and openness. Like Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2014) they also understand it to be "a process of engagement" and "way of doing things" rather than a "product" or "outcome" (p. 12). Successful partnerships are only possible if faculty have "vibrant, open, dialogic, critical relationships with students all the time" (Frank, p. 15). Franks explains:

> If you're to have partnerships with students and student-led partnerships, in terms of what we do, you have to have relationships with them. You have to spend time with them. You need to talk with them. And you have to be open. (Frank, p. 15)

Espousing the reciprocity, equality of contribution and parity of esteem associated with authentic partnership (Cook-Sather et al., 2014), Frank sees himself as being part of an academic "ecosystem" and "soundtrack of voices, all of whom are trying to make something together" (p. 17). His idea of being part of a soundtrack, too, contrasts with the notion of "giving students voice", which can suggest that students only have voice when faculty grant it to them (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). That said, even if Cathy frames partnership in terms of giving a voice to students, I believe she fully shares with others in the category the intention to work in partnership (Cook-Sather et al., 2014) and thus subjects herself to vulnerability and risk—the latter, I suggest, in Winter's (1989) sense of exposing one's practices and viewpoint to the "risk" of being transformed:

> It's hard to listen when you genuinely give people a voice. It's very difficult to listen to them when they start to tell you things you don't want to hear. And they inevitably will. (Cathy, p. 18)

Lucy is also conscious of the consequence of placing a genuine "focus on student voice" (p. 18) when it comes to partnering with learners on her student-led STER project:

> If I wanted to do something, but they didn't think it was a good idea, it didn't happen. And I had to be OK with that. And that's not always easy, especially when you have a vision for something. (Lucy, p. 21)

Category C academics like Cathy and Lucy are already engaging students as partners in learning, teaching and research, even if they do not describe or label such engagement as partnership. Their teaching is decidedly student-centred and relationship- and process-focused, the learning—for both themselves and their students—being "in the process" (Lucy, p. 22). The interviewees in this category who are or were teacher educators, furthermore, believe that "the notion of the children's voice in the classroom being equally as important and powerful and prescient" (Frank, p. 17) as that of the teacher has shaped their practice in higher education and above all, their continued wish to "activate student voice" (Brian, p. 9).

5. Conclusions and Future Work

The notion of students as partners in learning, teaching, and research is new or relatively new to many of this study's participating academics and is viewed by some of them (chiefly those in Category B) as problematic due to power issues and the language used to describe partnership. Category C academics, on the other hand, are already collaborating with undergraduate and postgraduate students in ways that significantly promote among learners a sense of belonging to a knowledge-building community of practice. These academics perceive partnership primarily as a relationship underpinned by genuine dialogue and openness, and their teaching, moreover, is decidedly student-centred and process-focused.

For academic colleagues who believe that there should be a mutually beneficial relationship between the research-teaching nexus and student-staff collaboration but who nevertheless feel that they have yet to engage students meaningfully as partners in learning, teaching and research, I recommend Cook-Sather et al.'s (2014) seven strategies for getting started in the work of partnership. Staff teams might also think about partnering with students in teaching-and-learning-related action research projects. Such projects would position students as both change agents and scholars and involve them explicitly in the scholarship of teaching and learning.

While writing this paper, I revisited Brew's (2006) concept of an inclusive, scholarly, knowledge-building community as well as the related notions of egalitarian learning community, community of scholars, partnership learning community, and learning and research community. And so, regarding future research, I suggest that further work be carried out on these various types of HE community of practice to consider ways in which they can be developed and sustained in order to have a lasting impact on both student and staff learning. Such research might also explore how student-staff collaboration on SoTL projects can best be promoted in contexts where research and teaching are largely seen as separate entities. In addition, future research might take a closer look at how departmental, faculty, school and institutional cultures and contexts impact on efforts and initiatives to link research and teaching.

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