Research Summary: Investigating international experiences of student-staff partnership in teaching and learning

Research Questions & Study Rationale

Despite the increasing attention to student-staff partnerships, it remains a relatively new topic in teaching and learning research, and differences exist in how partnership is understood and enacted (Bovill & Felten, 2016). Existing research also indicates that this work is difficult to do (Allin, 2014), and that systems and supports for people partnering are required (Marquis et al., 2016)

Given this context, this study examined the understandings and experiences of partnership of the diverse group of people participating in the Summer Institute (SI). In particular, it explored the following questions:

1. "How do people understand the idea of Students as Partners in teaching and learning and what are their experiences of such partnership both within and beyond the SI?"
2. "To what extent do people understand the SI as supporting their developing partnership work?"

Methodology

A student and two staff members worked together to design and conduct this study. Data were gathered in 2 ways:

- Focus groups during the SI (15 participants)
- Responses to reflective prompts completed as part of the SI (participants consented to let us use 191 such responses for the research)

Following data collection, focus group recordings and handwritten prompts were transcribed verbatim for analysis, and analysed using constant comparison.

Key Findings

Experiences of partnership

Participants described a number of benefits and challenges connected to working in partnership. Central benefits included the following:

- Enhanced work as a result of bringing multiple perspectives to bear
- Increased awareness of others' experiences
- Beginning to destabilize problematic power structures
- Increasing student agency
- Personal and professional development (e.g., the development of enhanced communication skills)

Challenges named by participants included:
- Problems with implementing and institutionalizing student-staff partnership initiatives (including lack of buy-in and challenges with sustainability)
- Difficulty navigating longstanding power structures
- Concerns about the relative inclusivity of partnership initiatives
- Personal/interpersonal challenges or conflict arising in partnerships
- Time pressures

Experiences of the SI
Data suggested that taking part in the SI helped participants to navigate some of the challenges of partnership to some degree. The following factors were highlighted as particularly significant:
- Opportunities for collaboration and community building, which helped participants feel supported in difficult work
- The generation of new ideas and understandings through the sessions and through interactions with others
- The provision of practical, project support that helped translate theoretical ideas into practice
- Opportunities to practice partnership within the institute, and to see it modelled effectively

Next Steps and More Information
A manuscript that describes the research in greater detail has been prepared and submitted for publication. Results have also been presented at the 2016 Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education conference, and will be shared again at the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL) conference in October 2016.

A follow up study is currently being planned. This research will involve interviews with 2016 SI participants to explore their ongoing partnership work and determine if and how their experiences of partnership have changed since the SI.

References
Allin, L. (2014). Collaboration between staff and students in the scholarship of teaching and learning: The potential and the problems. *Teaching and Learning Inquiry, 2*(1), 95-102.

Bovill, C. & Felten, P. (2016). Cultivating student-staff partnerships through research and practice. *International Journal for Academic Development, 21*(1), 1-3.

Marquis, E., Puri, V., Wan, S., Ahmad, A., Goff, L., Knorr, K., Vassileva, I., & Woo, J. (2016). Navigating the threshold of student-staff partnerships: A case study from an Ontario teaching and learning institute. *International Journal for Academic Development, 21*(1), 4-15.