

Research Summary: Identity, Social Location and Faculty Experiences of Pedagogical Partnership

Study Rationale

In a widely cited definition, Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten (2014, pp. 6-7) describe student-faculty partnership as “a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants [students and faculty] have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision-making, implementation, investigation, or analysis”. Research and scholarship have documented many benefits of partnership working (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017), including its potential to contribute to redressing injustices experienced by members of marginalized groups in postsecondary education (Cook-Sather, 2018; Mercer-Mapstone, Guitman, & Acai, 2019). Such work suggests, for example, that partnership can enhance feelings of belonging for equity-seeking students who participate (Colón Garcia 2017; Perez-Putnam, 2016), contribute to epistemic justice by recognizing and valuing marginalized knowledge (de Bie et al., 2019), and support the development of more equitable, inclusive, and/or culturally responsive classrooms (Cook-Sather & Agu, 2013; Cook-Sather & Des-Ogugua, 2019; Marquis et al., under review). The bulk of this research focuses on experiences and outcomes of partnership for students, however, with less attention paid to if and how partnership might contribute to combatting inequities affecting faculty and staff.

Given this gap in the existing literature, this project aimed to explore how faculty occupying different social locations (i.e., different, intersecting social identities) perceive and experience pedagogical partnerships. We addressed the following research questions in particular:

- How do faculty/academic staff perceive the potential for partnership to contribute to institutional change, particularly in relation to issues of equity and inclusion?
- How do they perceive the fact that partnership discourse often calls for attempts to level faculty/staff-student hierarchies, renegotiate systems of authority, and re-think notions of expertise?
- How, if at all, do they understand their own identities and social locations to shape their experiences of partnership and/or perceptions of its potential?

Methodology

- Following ethics clearance, academic staff at four universities with established pedagogical partnership schemes (in Australia, Canada, the US, and the UK) were invited to complete an online survey that included multiple choice, ranking, and textual response questions.
- At the end of the survey, participants indicated whether they'd be interested in participating in a follow up interview to discuss their perceptions in more detail.
- Interviews were semi-structured and involved a range of open-ended questions about interviewees' experiences of partnership, their views on its capacity to contribute to equity, and their perceptions of how their social locations influence their perspectives and experiences.

Respondents

- We received 44 responses to the survey (3 Aus; 11 UK; 24 Cdn; 6 US). Most survey participants suggested they had previously participated (formally or informally) in pedagogical partnership (n=36).
- Participants were invited to describe their social locations/identities in ways most relevant/appropriate to them. While respondents reported a range of varying social locations, the participant pool also reflected the fact that members of equity-seeking groups are still underrepresented within faculty and academic staff roles (e.g., 35 respondents identified as white/Caucasian/white European; 35 respondents identified as heterosexual/straight).
- 16 of these respondents chose to take part in a follow up interview. (1 Aus, 3 UK, 3 US, 9 Cdn)

Key Findings

Analysis of the data from the survey and the interviews revealed the following broad themes:

Social location and experiences of the academy

Participants offered a wide range of perspectives about if/how their social locations influenced their experiences in and of the academy. Some argued that social location had little effect on their experiences, while others weren't sure, and others still suggested that social location had affected their experiences in significant ways. Amongst the latter group, for instance, participants indicated that factors such as age, gender, race, and institutional role influence the extent to which their expertise is questioned or challenged by students or colleagues, and/or highlighted opportunities for empathy or connection with similarly located students.

Social location and experiences of partnership

Similarly, participants reported a variety of perspectives on if/how social location influences their experiences of and perspectives on pedagogical partnership. Those that agreed that experiences of partnership were mediated by social location, for example, pointed to a variety of potential effects. Some described ways in which social location might encourage partnership (e.g., when experiences of marginalization made them aware of the need to promote more egalitarian ways of working) or discourage it (e.g., if students found them intimidating due to perceptions of age, race, and/or gender). Some also noted that social location affects experiences of taking part in partnerships if and when these arise (e.g., one participant pointed out that experiences of inequity connected to their marginalized social locations often left them feeling more vulnerable than some students within partnerships, in spite of the privilege attached to their faculty role).

Partnership's contribution to equity and inclusion

The data likewise reflected divergent views on partnership's capacity to contribute to equity in postsecondary institutions. Some suggested that partnerships can open up valuable opportunities for students from equity-seeking groups and/or lead to the development of meaningful equity-focused projects. At the same time, many pointed to concerns about how

accessible partnership opportunities are, and some raised questions about whether partnership is sufficient to produce meaningful or systemic change.

Influence of context

Alongside comments about the ways in which social location might/might not influence perceptions and experiences of partnership, participants also highlighted the important role played by context. Some suggested that their departmental, disciplinary, or institutional cultures were congruent with partnership, for instance, and thus supported partnership working, while others argued that factors like a lack of institutional recognition or a broader hierarchical culture made participating in partnership difficult.

Next Steps

- Preliminary findings (drawing on data from 3 of the participating universities) were presented at the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching & Learning (ISSOTL) conference in Bergen in 2018, and at the EuroSoTL Conference in Bilbao in 2019. A brief paper connected to the EuroSoTL presentation was included in the conference proceedings (Marquis et al., 2019; see <https://www.ehu.eus/documents/8301386/10560621/Actas-EuroSoTL-Conference-2019.pdf/1a7d5867-e222-4aab-6f92-a7948f1fbd67>).
- A more extensive manuscript, which discusses the first two themes described above in greater detail, has been submitted for publication.
- Findings from the present study also informed our contributions to a panel presentation about faculty experiences of partnership at the 2019 ISSOTL conference in Atlanta.
- Partnership program directors/contacts at each of the participating universities will be provided with slightly modified versions of this summary report, which include some additional, high-level information about findings from their institutions, so they can consider the implications of this research for their partnership work going forward. The additional information to be provided in these reports includes the number of respondents from the institution who reported participating in partnership, and institution-specific frequency counts for two survey questions (one asking respondents to indicate whether they agreed that partnership can contribute to equity, and one asking them to indicate whether they agreed that one or more aspects of their social location affect their perceptions of partnership).

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