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A SHARED REFLECTION ON RISK IN TRYING TO WORK WITH STUDENTS IN PARTNERSHIP

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This essay shares and contrasts two perspectives on risks arising from seeking to work in partnership with students in a host of ways, over a period of several years in a particular setting. I (Colin) have been working in a variety of roles in UK higher education for nearly forty years. I am a believer, scholar, and practitioner of fostering student engagement, and working in partnership aligns with so many of my values and with my educational and personal philosophy. I frequently say “it is the right thing to do,” but that does not mean it is easy! What spurred me into writing this account is what occurs too often when I present on partnership to staff colleagues outside my own department and I hear the comment: *It’s easy for you to do this. You are a head of department. There are no risks to you.*

I (Ruth) am fairly new to Higher Education, graduating in 2013 from the department I now work in, and my career is just beginning. Experiencing a degree built on an ethos of engagement and partnership as an undergraduate motivated me to extend this experience to as many students as possible, after seeing first hand the value and impact it creates. However, as a new academic trying to build credibility and trust among peers and students, I find following a model of partnership particularly challenging. I see this reflective account as an opportunity to compare and contrast the risks I perceive, alongside my more senior colleague (and partner!).

Working in Higher Education currently is full of challenges and tensions for staff. The current political and cultural context creates such an emphasis on performativity. For staff, that means work intensification, stress, and pressure to ‘satisfy’ students and to conform to ever increasing regulation and scrutiny in a transactional, consumer led model of ‘service.’ This is hardly an environment that fosters partnership. Challenging this culture through engaging in partnership poses significant risks to individuals. In addition, some sources of risk might also stem from the nature of being human and trying to build a foundation of respect, reciprocity, and responsibility to build partnerships (Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten, 2014).

Risks for Staff

There are barriers to getting started and to sustaining such approaches. There are practical constraints such as prioritizing time (working in partnership takes more time), getting ‘permission’ to change existing practices/rules, and too many students. The students we work with might not favor this approach either because they do want the extra responsibility that comes with empowerment or do not feel they have the knowledge or confidence to co-decide (and that leads to critical feedback). There are ethical tensions, too: who gets offered the opportunity or selected to participate – the staff ‘leader’ being exclusive or elitist. Coping with the unpredictable and necessarily ‘not being in control’ and recognising there can be bad as well as good outcomes, for example disengaging some students. Partnership is all about relationships and for it to be meaningful we must invest ourselves in it to a significant degree, with all the risks that entails.

There are themes running through these issues that are frequently invisible and not at all explicit and that are uncomfortable to discuss, not least because they make all of us feel vulnerable. These themes include power (empowerment and disempowerment), credibility, respect, our professional and personal identities and sense of self. It is on these themes that we will focus our own personal reflections from our differing standpoints on.

Setting

We both work in the Combined Honours Centre. This is designed to be the administrative and support hub for an undergraduate degree where students study two or three different subjects from a choice of over twenty, drawn from the humanities, arts and social sciences. They study the same modules as single honors students (the latter is the common model in the UK). Flexibility and choice is our students' and our staff mantra, but it does have a flipside. There are major challenges to forming a student identity and a sense of belonging when each student is taking an almost unique path through their degree. There is the double obstacle of feeling 'other' in a class of students who (appear to) share a subject cohort identity and of having no opportunities to come together as a combined degree cohort.

I (Colin) took up the role of Director of the department and degree in 2008. I knew little about this degree having worked in single-discipline higher education for the preceding thirty years. It was obvious that there were big problems—not least the lowest student satisfaction in the university and students expressing a sense of exclusion and isolation. A senior colleague informed me that the degree was considered 'a basket case'—hardly encouraging! However, I saw it as a unique opportunity, a *tabula rasa* to permit fresh ideas. My role was so less constrained than any previous post. The unit was just two admin colleagues and myself, so no one to inhibit (my) ideas. I was just completing a body of empirical work about student engagement and starting to appreciate what really influences why students might engage (Bryson, 2014). In this new role, it seemed entirely appropriate to ask the students what the issues were, what solutions they could suggest, and how we could work together to deliver that. I did not see any risk in doing this at all—indeed, it was so exciting and invigorating. All the great ideas I have read about, or heard about at conferences, could be suggested to my student partners as part of co-finding solutions. I threw all my waking hours into this holistic student engagement strategy, and the students who responded to these invitations to share responsibility invested just as much of themselves as I did. Within a couple of years we had a very proactive student representation mechanism with regular elections, an exemplary peer mentoring scheme, and a vibrant student society that worked together to transform the student experience (Bryson, 2010).

I (Ruth) was introduced to the concept of student partnership as an undergraduate on the Combined Honours programme in September 2010. After a transition period, I decided to take up some of the unique opportunities the degree offered, including becoming a peer mentor and the society President. During this time I experienced occasions of working in partnership with Colin, and other staff, both inside and outside the curriculum. Following my graduation in July 2013, I started working in a new role for the Centre, as their Student Engagement Coordinator. This hybrid role gave me insight into supporting students from an administration perspective and supporting their learning both in and outside the classroom. Working alongside Colin as a staff colleague developed

my understanding of partnership and offered the chance to share the responsibility of working in this mode, particularly during our co-teaching sessions. I have recently become a Teaching Fellow, and although I still have the same supportive staff team around me, I have felt an increased sense of risk delivering this agenda alone in a classroom. This promoted post requires that I act with autonomy and take more responsibility, raising the stakes for me. In both my roles, I have found it less risky to work in partnership with students outside the curriculum, as it is voluntary, but it is still present when I am responsible for supporting them to deliver quality peer support, for which Combined Honours traditionally has a strong reputation.

Working in partnership has become the guiding principle in all that we do. It takes many forms, and a major development occurred in 2014. Prior to this, the partnership had been extra-curricular only, via working on a shared agenda with student representatives to create mentoring and peer learning schemes for example (although we had co-designed modules together). We had been growing concerned that we only had a limited number of student roles, and although they were open to all, such voluntary opportunities were not as inclusive as we wished and created a selective mode of partnership. We felt that only those that were most predisposed volunteered for such roles. To address the deficiencies, we sought a universal mode (Bryson, Furlonger & Rinaldo-Langridge, 2015) to involve the whole cohort in working in partnership. Therefore, we introduced partnership into the curriculum, offering modules in which student participants co-designed as much as possible (delivery, content, assessment etc.) as the module proceeds. From experience, this is messy and opens us up to all sorts of new risks! For example, some students are less than willing to engage in the extra responsibility this requires them to take.

Reflecting about risks

These following examples of risk arising from partnership work have troubled one or both of us, in considerable measure. We start with an area of risk that affects us both but in different ways. The two final examples pertain to areas of risk that we feel are particularly acute in our individual roles and positions. For Colin this is scholarship and for Ruth this is in her role as a teacher.

Student voice and power gaps

A key dimension for me (Colin) is the necessity of legitimating partnership through explicitly linking to student representation. My own long history as a trade union representative and my collective values very much align with this. The Student Staff Committee (SSC) plays a central role in Combined Honours of both approving and monitoring partnership initiatives and activities. In order to empower the representative we ensure that there are only a few staff in ratio to students at the committee meetings. The group has a student chair and secretary and a staff facilitator (Ruth). I consider the presence of the Head of Department is essential to endorse the legitimacy and status of the SSC. We (Colin and Ruth) debate frequently about the impact of my (Colin's) participation. Are the students inhibited by their perception of the power inherent in the office of Head of Department, or perhaps, the confidence and political adeptness I have after a lifetime of influencing meetings to get the outcome I favor? I deliberately try hard not to influence (most of the time!) by what I say, but non-verbal signals are less neutral. I can argue that the representatives are elected adults and should be confident enough to make their own decisions, it would be

patronizing and false to ‘protect’ them, but is that just a defensive justification? An example is when I do not think the students are being radical or assertive enough about an issue, or conversely pursuing hopeless causes (in my opinion and with the advantage of intimate knowledge of the university). Sometimes I cannot hide my own view.

I (Ruth) feel my experience as an undergraduate on our degree programme, and my more junior status, creates an advantage to breaking down the power barriers in these extra-curricular types of student-staff partnership situations. Being a recent graduate of this degree adds to my credibility and authenticity, as I can directly empathize when we are discussing how to improve the student experience. However, I am getting further away from this and it may increase the risk of power disruption in future for me. I also currently have an advantage due to Colin’s presence. He is automatically perceived as the most powerful member of the committee due to his position as Head of Department, which helps to reduce my power in the students’ eyes and allows me to conduct my staff facilitator role with a level of neutrality, supporting and encouraging all members of the committee with their contributions. The biggest risk for me, at present, in delivering our SSC in partnership, is maintaining production and efficiency, and the sense of responsibility I feel to the students being represented. If an issue arises, sometimes I want to solve it quickly so it does not impact the wider experience too much. This can often make it tricky to work together with the students through this process, and disempowers them, undermining the relationship we want to create.

Scholarly authority and co-researching

Perhaps more radical and more risky for me (Colin) is working in partnership in scholarly activity. Although co-researching between staff and students has a long history, the role/responsibility of the student is often controlled and/or they only participate in part of the process. I seek a more equal mode of participation. Thus, when I am invited to present externally or internally on student engagement and partnership, I always try to co-present with a student or students. I try to practice participatory action research, too (Otis & Hammond, 2010), and I have co-written several times on joint projects I have undertaken with students—again, a rarer practice than it should be (Mapstone-Mercer et al., 2017). When I took on the senior editorship of the *Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal*, I tried to adopt the approach of having student authors, student reviewers, and student editors.

Doing all this has really challenged me, made me feel quite vulnerable, and has not been as successful as I would have wished. It was very challenging to launch a new journal with such an inexperienced team, of whom I probably expected too much. So much of my own identity is as a scholar. As somebody who never did a PhD and had an unusual route to becoming an academic, I took a long time to feel established—many years and many papers! Academic publishing is such a brutal process; anonymous reviewers can be somewhat unkind (what an understatement), and this undermines an author’s confidence. Exacerbating this situation of gaining academic respect and prestige was my decision to become a scholar of learning and teaching, the Cinderella step-sister of ‘proper research.’ Even after the affirmation of various awards and gaining a chair (after ten years of trying), the first L&T chair in my faculty ever, I have never felt completely secure. I do not exactly feel like an imposter but it is a sensitive topic, and not one I discuss except with my closest friends. I hope the academic world is changing, if ever so slowly, and I do not want to discourage

colleagues at earlier stages in following a path of SoTL scholarship rather than disciplinary research – so have never aired this issue in print before now.

This baggage makes co-researching with students a ‘brave space’ for me (Arao & Clemens, 2013) and creates all sorts of dilemmas between my partnership ethos and scholarly identity. I try hard to be collegial in the sense of being welcoming, encouraging, constructive, and patient. I cannot put aside completely my scholarly self (the critical upholder of ‘quality’), nor would it be appropriate to do so. Of course, most of my student co-presenters and co-writers have produced insightful and considered contributions of high standard, and of true value. I wonder, though, if I am too cautious and rather selective, therefore not inclusive, of partners to work and disseminate with, both in terms of topics and who to work with. I tend to favor those who share my agenda. I am less concerned about my scholarly reputation (I hope!) and more about ensuring the work is of value to the wider community. On reflection, does this inhibit my letting go, and really allow my research partners the full benefits of such opportunities?

Classroom authority and partnership in the curriculum

For me (Ruth) risk in student-staff partnership is highest when attempted within the curriculum. Teaching is the central activity for me at this career point rather than the type of scholarship discussed above. This academic year was the first time I have led and delivered an undergraduate module, Graduate Development, completely alone without the support of a wider teaching team. I underestimated how challenging this would be, and in my first workshop found myself reassuring the students that I had four years’ experience on the module to try to legitimize my position as module leader. Whether this was my own under-confidence, rather than truly how the students perceived me, I am not sure, but for the first time in my teaching career I was fearful, knowing that the students’ enjoyment, understanding, and achievement on that module were down to me alone (not a very partnership outlook – shared responsibility went out of the window in that moment)!

Nevertheless, as the term has progressed I have grown in confidence and am really enjoying delivering the module. I knew that my colleagues were consulting students about their assessment in other modules, and having seen it work successfully in previous years, I wanted to open up discussion with my class to decide the parameters together (criteria, weighting, and deadlines). Although the process in the classroom went successfully, largely down to my supporters (students I have a strong working relationship with, who drew in their less confident peers), and they agreed some headline criteria, I spent a long time writing up what each criterion would look like under the grade boundaries because I wanted to alleviate the risk to the students’ of misunderstanding any criteria. This was also to protect myself from any potential risk associated with students complaining about their marks. As I am less experienced with marking, I feel a huge sense of responsibility and want to be able to justify my mark in my own words if challenged by any student. I hope to continue a philosophy of partnership in my modules going forward, but I am wary of the module feedback and worried that if students’ provide negative comments on me lacking experience it may jeopardise how comfortable I feel using this as a model going forward, because my focus will return to legitimising my position.

I (Colin) suspect Ruth is doing a better job than I ever did in navigating curricular partnership. Although I am very relaxed in my teaching and classroom role, practicing partnership in the

classroom raises all sorts of risks and tensions, principally around assessment, which so challenges trust relationships. Partnership changes the act of delivering modules, which I am very comfortable with, to a much more uncertain process. Some of the students do not want the responsibility we thrust upon them. My educational self pushes me to continue, and that negative feedback is bearable, as long as some learning takes place, and reassures my emotional self. Of course, I have the affirmation of some very positive feedback in the past, which decreases any vulnerability. When partnership was introduced to the Graduate Development modules, I co-taught with Ruth (and others) and could be the buffer to absorb this risk, as the senior colleague who should take responsibility. I could deploy all the extra resources I have accumulated: experience, scholarly reputation, and expertise to persuade the students that they could not only cope but thrive with such freedom and choice. I did (and do) make mistakes, getting the micro-processes of partnership wrong, but students are kind and forgiving (we sometimes forget their capacity to be so). We have benefitted greatly from Cathy Bovill's body of work and advice about paying care and attention to the importance of small details and actions in creating a better climate for partnership in the classroom.

Concluding thoughts

Surely a factor here is personal attitudes to risk. I (Colin) do not consider myself a risk taker in some conventional senses (in wider life), but I am driven by particular ideals and values. Indeed, I have always taken risks on behalf of causes I believe in. As a local trade union activist almost from the outset of my career, I stood up against management and senior colleagues. I hoped they might respect me for that, but there were occasions when I came close to being sacked, was blocked from promotion, and did not get my contract renewed. I might say that being an outspoken champion of partnership has not always been popular with colleagues who oppose this on practical and/or ideological considerations. As you rise through the management structure, the pressures to conform increase rather than lessen.

The point is whose opinion matters. There are two groups who matter to me—the students as a whole and the colleagues in my own department—in part because I have a measure of responsibility to and for them and their wellbeing matters to me, rather more than others. Therefore, their good opinion matters and needs to be balanced against my aspirations and goals to promoting partnership, which creates some tensions from time to time, as new colleagues come on board and our partnership initiatives extend into new and more radical territory.

I (Ruth) truly believe in the value of partnership. In terms of whose opinion matters to me, of course the views of the students I work with and my immediate colleagues are very important, but being in a more junior position means that I want to consider the opinions of those who I feel may influence my future as well. Sharing responsibility and working collaboratively between students and staff is a really rewarding style of learning for all. By the nature of this style, some risks are always going to be present, but we can work to reduce them and lower the stakes as much as possible. However, our current climate in Higher Education is problematic for this style, as the risks for both parties are currently so high when performance and accountability are given priority. Students have to take a risk in trusting that working in this mode is worthwhile, despite it being so different from the culture of education they are accustomed to (and still experience in other areas of their teaching). And new academics are under pressure from both students and colleagues to

conform to the culture and traditions already in place, and have to show great bravery to move beyond this. I am lucky to work in a team that supports and promotes partnership practice. If I did not work in my current environment, I would have found it much tougher to incorporate these values into my role; the risk to progressing my career might have been too great.

Writing this essay has been an illuminating experience to both of us. We rarely talk about risks in the way we have here. It forces us to enter a 'brave space' and let down the professional shield and distance we usually put up when disseminating our work. We do accept that some of the risks of working in partnership are made more acute by how we are positioned in our career roles and stages and how we perceive others may see us. Some risks are shared, more or less unequally, others stem from how we position ourselves.

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