Learners Without Borders: Tales from the Trails of Navigating Transitions from Student Partners to Staff Partners – While Retaining Students as Partners

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LEARNERS WITHOUT BORDERS: TALES FROM THE TRAILS OF NAVIGATING TRANSITIONS FROM STUDENT PARTNERS TO STAFF PARTNERS – WHILE RETAINING STUDENTS *AS* PARTNERS

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Ancient Ways of Doing

As self-appointed learning and teaching student partners in the Telemachus Ancient History Mentor Program (*Tele's Angels*) at Macquarie University, and avid scholars of the discipline of Ancient History, we are very familiar with Aristotle's peripatetic style of engagement with his pupils at the Lyceum, Athens —walking and talking. What a joy it was to learn that the archaeological evidence at Nalanda University in India (established in AD 450) revealed that student and teaching living spaces were adjacent to a large learning space around a central podium. Both of these examples came into being long before Humboldt's (1970) articulation of students' direct involvement in speculative thinking and research communities without strictly planned courses in nineteenth century AD. Or indeed before Benjamin's (2004) framing of the measure of university's success through the productivity of its students—positioning students simultaneously as both teachers and learners in the twentieth century. When did the prominent role of students as active partners in the production and progress of knowledge cease to be standard or best practice? Now, as staff contributors to higher education over the past decade, we wonder: why is it so difficult to gain support for students as partners (SaP) projects, whether it be for institutional funding, or for departmental and faculty peer endorsement and collaboration? Is it because it is perceived as a risky non-traditional pedagogy, despite historical evidence to the contrary? Could the answer lie in seminal SaP experiences in our own learning history/ies? Perhaps reflection on answers to these questions may provide opportunities to challenge and transform cultures towards SaP initiatives and ensure their sustainability as a fundamental learning experience within higher education.

Tele's Angels

We begin with our formative time in *Tele's Angels* as learning and teaching student partners and explore the features and characteristics of our experience that have informed our current academic and professional praxes, now as staff participants in SaP initiatives.

The Telemachus Ancient History Mentor Program is a student-initiated, student-driven, and student-sustained academic peer support service for first-year students, founded in 2002 in the Department of Ancient History at Macquarie University. Volunteer undergraduate student mentors in second year and above create a learning community focused on academic skills and

building social networks through the provision of transition assistance, academic support and resources, and networking for and amongst students and staff. A key objective is that the mentors themselves are beneficiaries of all activities, embodying the program motto: "to give is to receive," thus promoting shared responsibility and distributed student leadership. The sustainability of the program lies in the embedded 'legacy of care' philosophy, so that first-year students will recognise its worth and be proud to take over mentor roles as second-year or more senior students. *Tele's Angels* has been the subject of international research projects and publications (for example, Power *et al.* 2011), and is recognised by faculty, institutional, and national awards for its contribution to learning and teaching in the First-Year Experience and Programs that Enhance Learning categories. This contribution to learning is evidenced by its positive impact on retention (the mean loss rate for first-year Ancient History subjects at Macquarie University was notably less than those for the university, sector and nation) and sustained outstanding student feedback.

Our SaP experience may be visualised as positioned within the upper-most, positive and autonomous limit of SaP. We propose to use Brew's (2013) holistic model for Research-based decision-making (Figure 1) to demonstrate different levels of SaP throughout this paper. In the case of our *Tele's Angels* experience we identify exclusively with the outer track that emphasises the extremes of autonomy: self-determination through and through (self-identification, self-direction, etc.). Staff, both department and faculty, were relatively 'hands-off' in terms of decision-making (i.e. Brew's outer track), but provided the required encouragement, guidance, and support (Brew's middle track) to endorse and facilitate a community of practice—within which learners of all levels surrender to the whirlwind of shared enthusiasm and passion for our discipline.
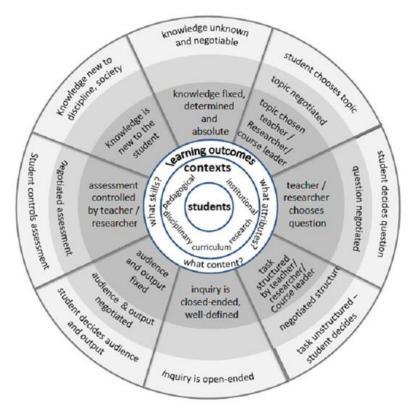
Figure 1. A holistic model for Research-based learning decision-making (Brew, 2013, Fig. 3)

We each found the SaP participation in *Tele's Angels* to be the most powerful and formative aspect of our student experience, which would go on to have immeasurable impact on our personal, professional, and intellectual development. For one of us it was a catalyst for lateral skill building that would open a whole new world and career path in student advocacy, learning design, and experience. For the other, it provided a laboratory in which traditional modes of teaching and learning delivery and reception could be examined, explored, and experimented with, in order to create 'non-binary' learning engagements: pedagogies which seek to mutually inform and extend junior ('student') and senior ('teacher') contributors. We are, after all, *all* learners—without borders.

If we could pinpoint five lessons from our time as student partners it would include the following:

Authenticity

It is incredibly easy to tick the 'student voice' box via invitational representation on panels or committees. However, we fear that delimiting SaP activities within such fora reduces the intent or purpose to mere tokenism. It takes time, energy, skills, and resources to have your finger on the collective pulse of students: to listen to them, to understand them, to respond to their needs. It is certainly easier when you're one of them to some extent, but it's not impossible when you've transitioned over the threshold to the 'staff' side of the SaP equation. *Tele's Angels* taught us that terms and actions like 'student voice' position students as passive consumers. Involving students in dialogue, decision-making, and design repositions students as collaborators, contributors, and change agents—authentic partners.

Empathy

Tele's Angels taught us that the further we progress from our first-year experience the more difficult it is to remember 'not knowing' and the accompanying challenges of being in that place in learner history. Perhaps the closest that we have come to revisiting that *tabula rasa* has been our appointments as professional and academic staff in institutions different to our *alma mater*. A nostalgic disquiet descended as we attempted to (re)learn how to borrow books; navigate different online learning tools; decipher assessment grades, codes and rubrics; and situate our own learning and teaching style(s) within the landscapes of practice of other universities, in other cities, and even in other countries. We have deliberately sought to amplify this disquiet to alloy with the similar experiences of our younger peers and student partners.

Vulnerability

From the outside looking in, modern academia may be perceived as less of an ivory tower and more of an iron fortress, the main construction material of which may be posed to be knowledge

dominance. From the inside looking out, however, the greater majority of us know that this is merely a construct; a more familiar architecture being that of a fragile glass house, the walls of which we reinforce daily by our silent subscription to endemic imposter syndrome. If only these glass walls allowed for true transparency.

Indeed, the ideal environments for successful SaP relationships are those that foster and promote openness and inclusiveness. We learned that these qualities can only be fully realised when we genuinely make space for vulnerability—for all partners. It's OK to not always be 'right' (whatever 'right' means, anyway), or indeed, to always have an answer. In fact, it's healthy. *Tele's Angels* taught us this lesson in a number of ways. Perhaps the best example is from one of the first times we facilitated any group learning session, such as a tutorial or seminar. There is an anxiety accustomed to new facilitators who either: a) pose a question and do not receive instant responses from the group; or b) are asked a question to which they do not know an answer. We are trained to fear of that silence, that tangible absence of noise we should come to associate with the static that 'learning is happening.'

A critical lesson in this moment comes in the internal struggle: do I fill this space with my expertise or do I allow the group of individuals to fill this space in their own time? Or, do I tell them that I don't know? We classify this as 'vulnerability' because learning to be silent and/or transparent to afford opportunity to a student partner is intrinsically intertwined with staff conceptualisations of self as 'expert.' We have learned that in order to scaffold students towards roles as genuine partners we must acknowledge vulnerability—either explicitly through conversations about our limitations, or implicitly through the silence that signals space for their contribution. This also allows us to reframe 'FAIL' as a 'First Attempt In Learning' and an imperative part of a healthy cycle of growth and progression in all domains of life.

Equality

When we speak to new colleagues who are not familiar with our past SaP work, we begin by asking, 'When you think about partners in your life—a spouse, a friend, a colleague—what is it about that relationship that is different from, say, a child, an associate, or a subordinate?' This juxtaposition typically conjures memories of a timeline of shared experiences, a cycle of exchange and reciprocity, where each person can contribute based on strengths, and there is space for understanding the other's weaknesses—without judgement. *Tele's Angels* taught us this through the sharing of work, energy, and compassion that makes the program such an equitable, cooperative entity. Perhaps one example to best demonstrate this lies in the model of distributed leadership amongst the team. We learned, as team leaders, that being 'in charge' of a particular event does not require you to deliver all components. Instead, that you can equitably delegate tasks. Such a model fosters group cohesion and demonstrates the value and efficacy of shared responsibility. When eventually transferred and applied to employment or community contexts, the importance of these experiences in tertiary education cannot be understated.

Horizontality

We have endeavoured to not only place students at the centre of learning but to actively facilitate their movement across the space that divides 'lecturer' on the podium from 'student' *en masse* in lecture theatre seats. By encouraging self-directed, autonomous learning, *Tele's Angels* strove to build students' capacities to take responsibility in their own education. In such horizontal spaces, teachers are no longer strictly perceived as the omniscient embodiment of knowledge described above, rather as experienced academic facilitators, or mentors. The *Tele's Angels* teaching philosophy has always been that learning is a community activity. We develop this sense of community by encouraging *all* involved in Ancient History teaching and learning at Macquarie University—students *and* staff—to recognise our interdependence and mutual responsibilities for positive and productive experiences in higher education.

Paying It Forward

We have now taken these principles and applied them in our practice as staff partners in learning and teaching in a variety of contexts—from transition pedagogy to widening participation and interdisciplinary program curriculum design.

Nurtured to Break Free (Widening Participation)

The Macquarie Undergraduate Research Internship (MURI) program was designed to: empower students from disadvantaged backgrounds to engage academic and social networks through real-world authentic research-based learning experiences; offer financial support and a sense of belonging through the provision of paid work on-campus; and deliver a transformational learning experience that would nurture students to break free from the inequality impeding their full participation in, and contribution to, the world. From its foundation in 2011, principles of the *Tele's Angels* approach were embedded within the internship, culminating in the 2014 transformation to a genuine SaP model. Alumni from 2012 returned to facilitate the program, and in 2015 they transitioned themselves from student partner to staff partner in the role of program coordinator.

The student facilitators administered and delivered the entire program. Authenticity was assured by bringing students 'behind-the-scenes' and setting them the task of designing, facilitating, and evaluating the learning outcomes, content, and experience. Rather than keeping them 'at arms length' (Brew, 2006), we put everything in their hands. Empathy and vulnerability from the student facilitators was shared and innate among these fellow learners further along the same learning path (Dennis et al., 2005). Having recent first-hand experience with the struggles associated with undergraduate research—imposter syndrome, writing anxiety, etc.—they were best placed, and ready and willing, to advise, support, and encourage the new interns. Much like the leadership development inherent in *Tele's Angels* mentors, the continued transformations of the MURI student facilitators were plainly visible. The equality the student facilitators in particular experienced through shared responsibility and distributed leadership gave them 'the confidence to believe' (Miles *et al.*, 2013) because they genuinely aspired to the principles of

cooperative excellence. People from different backgrounds can come together and grow in ways they cannot imagine (personally, professionally, intellectually, socially, politically, spiritually) when they have encouragement and resources, experience challenge, and respond to a call or purpose for a greater good (Boyte, 2014). In this way, the students recognised the indelible impact they had on each other, and all those they interacted with throughout the program—academics, guest speakers, visiting alumni—now and in the future. The collective power and vision of individuals was manifest.

Sustain Aspiration, Secure Employment (Transition Pedagogy)

The *Onsite/Offsite Insights* project in the Department of Ancient History at Macquarie University aimed to resolve fieldwork skill development gaps through a SaP approach. This project aimed to bring students into the core business of the Bachelor of Archaeology program across the entire student lifecycle—from 'induction' (transition in) to 'outduction' (transition out into the workforce), and all the engagement and outreach that happens in between. The inaugural cohort of the Bachelor of Archaeology (BArchers) began as recipients (participant-observers) and slowly transitioned over their first year of study into active agents (participant-contributors) determining the design and delivery of activities (induction, fieldwork skill workshops, and outreach events including Open Day). As second-year students, they took over and co-delivered all activities with staff partners for their new first year colleagues.

The authenticity of this design lies in staff: reaching out, making space, actively seeking to engage in dialogue with students; bringing them into the busy work; challenging them to think and do things differently; and ensuring that they are active, constant, and essential members of that on-going conversation and work. As with all the aforementioned examples, there is no better way to embed empathy and vulnerability than by design of the slightly more experienced peer as the facilitator of advice, support, and encouragement. The staff partners shaped the growth mindset from the very beginning—to be explorers, try things out, keep practising, pause to learn from mistakes, figure things out together. As the students took on more ownership, observing their decision-making has been an insightful reminder that *Tele's Angels* and MURI were not well-oiled machines from the outset. Mirroring the learning process—the sticky, uncomfortable business of the challenge—these BArchers did struggle to find their balance, their equal distribution of work and responsibility, finding ways to make their mark on what was passed on to them, solidifying their own identity, style, ways of doing. In this way, the horizontality principle of the learning community—the close, intertwined, symbiotic nature of the community relationship—was communicated from the beginning—perfectly encapsulated by a wise sign on the program director's office door: *You want to know the difference between a master and a beginner? The master has failed more times than the beginner has ever tried.* In this crucible, we saw the BArchers seek out assistance (help-seeking and trouble-shooting) from more advanced peers—postgraduate students, discipline student groups, lecturers, program directors, academics across campus, and *Onsite/Offsite Insights* partners—to bolster their collective efforts.

The Laboratory (Curriculum Design)

It is a rare and precious opportunity to be invited to introduce one's discipline to an institution. Genesis moments must always be seized: not only to forge new pathways to curriculum, resource, and research development; but also to ensure that SaP principles are embedded into every decision-making process concerning foundational curriculum, resource, and research design. Genesis provides a platform for examination of the traditional, exploration of the novel, and experimentation with the hybrid. And then, genesis provides a loophole of memory, allowing us to benchmark the 'hybrid' as 'the way it's always been done.' Under the umbrella of Bioarchaeology, the particular teaching and research interest of Biocultural Archaeology is an ideal laboratory in/with which to conduct such experiments. Biocultural Archaeology focuses on data derived from the scientific analyses of human skeletal and mummified remains, and then interprets them in conjunction with every other aspect of the archaeological record, thereby creating a more holistic framework in which to situate narratives of the lived experiences of the human past.

By nature, Biocultural Archaeology is interdisciplinary, so its natural pedagogical context includes explorations of the interstices of knowledge generation, curation, and exchange. We propose to harness the fertility and malleability of this 'non-place' (Augé, 1995) to hypothesis-test the perceived limitations and impermeability of prescribed boundaries—between disciplines, between participants of all levels, and indeed between institutions—and to question why, or indeed if, they should exist at all. Biocultural Archaeology Partnership Project One: Can teaching and learning in a 'non-place' facilitate 'non-binary' learning engagement/s?

Through a conscious post-podium mentality, we propose to promote horizontal, peer- and self-directed learning experiences within curriculum development. We will encourage independent, critical and creative thinking and skill-building, and facilitate interaction and discussion between and amongst the partnership cohort for negotiations or clarifications of content. In the tradition of Oyibe *et al.* (2015), our interdisciplinarity provides the ideal substrate for learners of all levels to explore connections between the known and the new; to form opinions, predictions, and hypotheses; to articulate, place value, and feel confidence in the face of doubt; and to challenge orthodoxies through new ideas. Here, every teaching and learning encounter becomes an active, organic, unique, and symbiotic relationship, where all participants are constantly moving and growing through dynamic feedback mechanisms.

We propose to develop courses—and within them, learning outcomes, assessment tasks, and graduate capabilities—that produce not only responsible practitioners of Bioarchaeology, but also responsible local, national, and global citizens. Within this framework, emphasis will be placed upon the fundamental nature of self-esteem and self-confidence as critical life skills, which all partners will need to call upon in every aspect of their lives, throughout their lives, irrespective of field, place, or manner of occupation. Extending from this will be incorporations of social etiquette, especially netiquette, in order to prepare, resource—and indeed learn from— all partners, in a world in which almost every human interaction (both on- and offline) is perceived as veritable self-publication.

At a time when borders and boundaries are the subject of international debate, despair, and division at the highest levels, it would seem that the laboratory of the academy provides an optimum opportunity to both test and demonstrate how partnerships in education can reclaim, reshape, and transform hitherto liminal, unknown, and even contested spaces.

Moving towards Partnership

By reassessing the utility and sustainability of traditional modes of engagement and actively involving student agency in every stage of this process, we hope to move ever closer to authentic partnerships with our junior colleagues. Indeed, in the age of the MOOC, networked-autodidacticism, #learninghacks, and the dissolution of classrooms as strictly three-dimensional spaces, the relevance and sustainability of tertiary education would seem to depend on our intrepidness and agility to go to 'off the grid' to where our students are, perhaps both physically and metaphysically. Through *Tele's Angels,* we have seen that such an approach fosters rare synergy in student engagement. As a means to counteract Brew's (2006) observation that students have been kept at "arm's length," we first 'reached out'—by offering personalised learning experiences according to students' individual needs and access capacities; and then enriching those experiences by 'drawing in'—we place students at the centre of learning and allow every encounter to affords opportunities for integration into a 'learning community.'

A Vision of the Future

We imagine a dynamic, collaborative future where authentic learning partnerships return to their rightful position at the nucleus of tertiary education. We envisage charters that acknowledge and cater for the multiplicity and simultaneity of roles and relationships that students play. We imagine the dissolution of long-contested boundaries between disciplines, and encourage resource, curriculum, and expertise osmosis between institutions on local, national, regional, and global scales. We dream of academic partners who strive to feed the contagion of viral learning, rather than develop its vaccine. We propose to take learning outside and beyond the perimeters of the academy by promoting initiatives such as Macquarie's *Professional and Community Engagement* (PACE) units. Beyond all borders, we seek embeddedness into the frontier realms of whatever professional, vocational, or volunteer realms that our students can demonstrate are relevant to their needs, making them capable of adapting to/for the jobs that don't even exist yet. Following the SaP trail beyond the badlands, *Work Integrated Learning* becomes *Life Integrated Learning*.

Acknowledgements

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