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Introduction

I have been teaching Horticulture and Landscaping to a very culturally diverse range of students for four years. During that time, I have become intrigued by the concept of partnership, both between student and teacher, and between faculty and industry. When I set out at MIT, I held the view that I was too busy just trying to teach my students to have any time to develop partnerships, and anyway my students were not ready to embrace partnership – they were just there to learn. I have now discovered that developing a partnership approach has significantly increased the effectiveness of teaching and learning, increased engagement of students, and increased my own fulfilment.

I often start a new semester explaining to my new students: "I am not here to teach you. I am here to help you learn how to learn." This usually raises a few eyebrows, but I firmly believe that enabling students to take responsibility for their own learning has a huge payback in many ways, and the outcomes, including feedback from students, would seem to fully endorse this. This essay focuses mainly on student/teacher partnerships in my teaching within higher education, and also with industry. I have trialled several initiatives to put theory into practice, based around the needs of my students, and research suggests that adult learners have a need to be perceived as taking responsibility for their learning. However, the challenge is meeting the needs of individual students within a group situation; partnership means very different things to different people. Nonetheless, developing a partnership has created a higher level of involvement, motivation, and commitment, leading to a more meaningful and productive educational experience.

Student-teacher partnerships

A recent publication of the UK's Higher Education Academy claims that the development of a student/teacher relationship is arguably one of the most important issues facing higher education (Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014). One of the key points outlined in the report is the need for students to have more room in defining and contributing to their learning within Higher Education. In many tertiary institutions there remains a traditional method of teaching where decision-making is exclusively the role of academic staff; students often lack agency and a voice and are treated as consumers of educational delivery (Bovill et al., 2010; Cook-Sather, 2015). Traditionally tutors have been all powerful in the delivery of course and assessment materials. The process of teaching and assessment has comprised the tutor defining the material or tasks, directing students in the completion of the tasks, students replicating the tasks, then the tutor judging the work or performance of the students. For my own teaching, this traditional view that tertiary education involves a transfer of knowledge from the tutor to the student is under question. I have found that taking a higher degree of partnership shifts the emphasis towards the role of me as the tutor to one of enabling students to learn in the most productive manner. This has not always been an easy process, and carries with it an element of risk. My professional background and teaching style has always been one of enabling others to achieve, so embracing this approach has come relatively naturally. The challenge is how to communicate the benefits of this approach to other staff members, and management, who have often relied on a much more didactic approach. Students do not

always welcome a shift in the power balance and research acknowledges that students usually do not have any experience of working in partnership. Often students will vocalise that the shift in responsibility is about teachers getting students to do their work for them, particularly when it comes to involvement in assessments. One student even complained that as the "paying customer" he felt he was not getting value for money as the receiver of his education! Fortunately, the vast majority of students do realise that there are benefits to them as well and are much more positive.

Incorporating a partnership approach in my own teaching

When I started at MIT I adopted the prevailing methodology in which many aspects of the course design and delivery were based on a traditional didactic model that did not allow or encourage participation from students. Furthermore, my personal impression at the outset was that neither I, nor my students, were ready for a partnership approach. In more recent times I have been involved in several initiatives that have significantly reversed this view. These have included changes that have encouraged a greater sense of ownership for the learning and closer collaboration with industry, both of which have increased the value of the educational experience. Students have responded very positively; many have commented that this approach has given them new insights to their learning, and having a safe space to make mistakes has given them confidence to experiment with new things.

Partnership with industry

The qualifications that I deliver are of a vocational nature, and as such, there is a strong need to ensure that graduates' skills closely align with the requirements of industry, and specifically employers in the relevant fields. Practices within this field are increasingly based on entrepreneurial development, new working practices and utilisation of modern technology. There is also an emphasis on developing life-long learning: much of my role is to help students learn how to learn, a skill that will facilitate greater engagement in the workplace and in personal life.

Throughout the course, students attend field trips on a regular basis to nurseries, landscape companies, and council-run enterprises such as city parks and botanical gardens. MIT has built strong relationships with these employers, who value the breadth and depth of the courses that are delivered at MIT. Graduates are generally highly regarded for this reason.

A new component of the courses is a four-week work placement block. This provides valuable hands-on experience for students and also serves as a low-risk work trial for employers. There is no expectation that students will be taken on as paid employees, but for the 2016 course, 75% of work placements led to full-time employment. The success of this programme is partly based on the quality of graduates entering the work force, but also is a product of the liaison and relationship building that takes place between MIT and employers. A new position was created last year to work closely with tutors and employers to maintain and develop mutually beneficial relationships. This has proved to be an extremely valuable initiative, leading to the establishment of strong links with industry. One very positive recent development has been inviting employers in to MIT to talk to students about what their expectations are. This has reinforced the message that the right qualification is only part of

the story – employers are looking for the "soft skills" such as taking initiative and responsibility for themselves and others.

Students undertaking the work experience block are required to carry out their own assessments of what they have learnt, to effectively document, and review the experience. This has made it more meaningful and fulfilling for students, which has increased motivation. The prospect of employment at the end of the block makes the learning process very real and relevant for the student. In previous courses, students were required to complete a certain number of practical projects as part of their structured course at MIT. With the new emphasis on work experience, we are able to place students with employers, where they are able to complete real-life practical projects. This makes the work much more meaningful and, in many cases, more closely linked to their future employment. In order for this partnership between student, tutor, and employer to work, there has to be close liaison to ensure that the work meets the required standard. This involves more work for me to go out to visit students, but nevertheless has proved to be a worthwhile development.

Pedagogical practices

I have introduced a form of *flipped learning* where students become actively involved in learning, as they participate and evaluate their own work, leading to greater ownership of their own learning. The model is based on students spending more time away from the traditional lecture format where I take the role of the primary source of information, towards more emphasis on group work and individual work away from class researching or working through resources. This approach has led to better interaction and team-building amongst students, as well as improvements in my ability to build relationships with students. It has also enabled me to re-think and reflect on my own teaching. There are inherent risks with this approach; it does rely on motivated learners, and in group activities it is difficult to know, or have evidence of, who did the work.

Another initiative is the trialling of a system of peer assessments that has had a beneficial impact on students' motivation and engagement. This is utilised at the formative assessment stage, partly due to the constraints that are laid down by NZQA that prevent summative peer assessments. Students in groups observe each other's practical performance in conducting a task (such as correctly and safely operating a piece of equipment). They then agree on feedback and a score to reflect the performance against a set of criteria. In the future there is potential to involve students in agreeing the criteria.

This exercise has helped students to develop a sense of ownership over the assessment process that has led to higher levels of active involvement and motivation. Students reported that "sitting on the other side of the fence provides a greater awareness of the assessment process." Students appreciate that the assessment becomes part of the learning process. It has also enabled deeper learning, rather than assessments being viewed by students as just a hurdle to be overcome. One issue with this practice is being able to quantify how accurate the student scores are. The process also requires more preparation time on my part, but I feel that the benefits of developing this partnership approach far outweigh any shortcomings. There have been some surprising and unforeseen outcomes to this process as well. Many students have reported that it has changed their perceptions of their own ability (in a good way) and their perceptions of other students who provided harsh feedback (not always in a good way!). A good lesson in life.

Online and blended learning

MIT has recently launched a new learning management system – *Canvas* – that has increased engagement amongst students. Features include the ability to share online resources, and undertake computer-based assessments. I have embraced this new technology which has enabled me to deliver blended learning that suits the needs of individuals. I am able to run classes where students have a greater degree of control over the subjects they are studying, and enables me to focus my time on assisting students with their work on a more individual basis. Many students have posted their own articles and resources that they wish to share with staff and other students, and have found the format to be accessible and easy to use.

There are several documented accounts of inviting student consultants to help develop student/staff partnerships, for example the Dialogues project carried out at Norwich University of the Arts (Fieldsend-Danks, 2016) and the SaLT programme at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges (Cook-Sather, 2015). At MIT staff are encouraged to put forward nominations for a student representative, and there is generally a good level of interest in this position. The reps perform an important function in enabling effective communication and dialogue between students, and maintaining channels of communication between myself and students. This I consider to be an important form of partnership. I have found that many students are unwilling to raise opinions in a formal class setting for fear of appearing uninformed, or not qualified to challenge their tutor. However, they often find that the support of one of their peers is a much less intimidating and challenging option. Student reps conduct anonymous surveys, as well as encouraging face-to-face sessions with other students. They are also able to communicate information from the faculty level to students. The student reps are able to create a student voice, encourage participation and involvement, all of which are pre-cursors to developing a partnership approach.

Formal feedback and future initiatives to be explored

Student surveys generate important information about the value that students gain from the course, and the quality of the teaching and learning. MIT conducts a first impressions survey, mid-course survey, and more comprehensive end-of-course survey. These are an important tool and help me to evaluate my own teaching methods, and to adjust them accordingly. The surveys themselves do not constitute partnership, but the results do assist in informing how students can be involved at a higher level in the course. In the future I hope to extend the active dialogue that I develop with students, possibly through a more informal structure of tutorial sessions, or extending the framework of student reps to encompass the role of student consultants. I am aware that there are students who find the concept of partnership quite intimidating and are unwilling to voice their opinions, so I would like to find means of developing meaningful partnerships with students at a level appropriate to their own needs.

Overall, developing a partnership approach has many benefits to tutors as well as students. However, this can present a number of challenges, not least the commitment to an increase in workload for teachers in supporting students, and for students in increased responsibility for their learning. Lack of confidence in students' own ability and knowledge can hinder their ability to give feedback and involvement in the design and delivery of assessments (Abdelmalak, 2016). Resistance to change and innovation of both students and teachers may

be the result of cultural forces and inherited practices. Developing a staged or progressive approach should consider the differing needs of individuals.

Embarking on this journey of developing partnerships with students has enriched my own experience of teaching, and has provided a greater level of engagement and value to the students. The key in my view is to build robust and meaningful relationships to create a safe space for myself and the students to make mistakes. Once this relationship was established, I surprised myself about just how far this journey could go. It's definitely not over yet.

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