

# **Bridging the Power Gap: GTAs and Student-Staff Partnership**

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## **Abstract**

Drawing on previous work done on student-staff partnership (SSP), this paper will consider how involving GTAs in SSP could help bridge the gap between students and staff, with GTAs bringing a unique perspective to their teaching since they are simultaneously students and teachers (Standen, 2018). To do so, this article will build on and contribute to existing literature on SSP and how engaging in SSP can be a transformative learning experience for staff and students at different levels (Healey & Jenkins 2009; Cook-Sather 2014). While SSP has been shown to improve student engagement and outcomes and bridge the gap between research and teaching, it is not without challenges (Bovill, Cook-Sather, Felten, Millard & Moore-Cherry 2016). One key issue around SSP is naturally the concept of partnership, which can be challenging for staff and students alike who may be more accustomed to a hierarchical power dynamic (Cook-Sather 2014). Some forms of research collaboration that are typical in HE can involve SSP, but they often focus more on collaboration between students and staff, perhaps relying more on an apprenticeship model of teaching, which is intrinsically more hierarchical. This paper will consider the relationship between power and participation through the work of Arnstein (1968), arguing that it is important to place GTAs in this liminal space to bridge the power gap. Reflecting on my own experience across two SSP projects as both

student and GTA, I argue that being both a student and teacher made me more aware of how I learned and how I could bring that knowledge to my teaching practice and collaboration with other students. As research students, GTAs can also engage in a kind of praxis (cycle of theory, action and reflection) when using SSP in their teaching. In this way, they are uniquely positioned to demonstrate how SSP empowers both students and staff to learn from each other and produce innovative research and ideas (Cook-Sather 2014).

**Keywords:** student-staff partnership, postgraduate teaching assistants, praxis, power

## **Introduction**

Student-staff partnership has often been discussed in terms of the transformation it can encourage for both staff and students (Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten 2014; Cook-Sather 2014; Healey, Flint & Harrington 2014). Essential in this process of transformation is the challenging of traditional power dynamics within the partnership, which can lead us to fundamentally interrogate our understandings of working and thinking. Instead of focusing on the threatening aspects of partnership work with students, Cook-Sather (2014: 191) draws attention to the ‘paradigm shift’ that can occur when staff “recognise students as differently positioned knowers with insights to share as partners in exploration but not ultimate authorities”. Reshaping teaching and learning in a more collaborative sense can lead to a situation where staff and students can co-construct different roles and identities together.

While more traditional methods of involving students in staff research are inherently collaborative, and therefore create opportunities for transformation and for challenging the traditional dynamic between students and academic staff, simply working together is not likely to involve the same transformation that occurs when students are positioned as partners (Marie, 2018). Indeed, Allin (2014) questions whether the nature of collaboration between students and staff in HE can ever escape the power dynamics that seem to be inherent in the power/knowledge nexus within universities. By exploring the power dynamics between staff and students, we can find spaces in which these hierarchies can be disrupted, and GTAs may be uniquely positioned to do this work as they simultaneously hold both positions.

This article will begin by briefly introducing SSP theory, followed by a more in-depth exploration of the role of power in SSP through the work of Arnstein (1968). It will then present two case studies that exemplify my own experience engaging in SSP from two different perspectives, student and GTA, to illuminate the role of power from two different positions, as well as looking more specifically at the role of GTAs within SSPs. I will then outline some implications and suggestions for staff and GTAs engaging in SSP.

## **Student-Staff Partnership as Productively Disruptive**

In order to engage in partnership, more traditional roles of staff and students must be challenged, reconceptualising traditional dynamics that position academics and researchers as experts while students are seen as inexperienced and unknowledgeable (Allin, 2014; Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014). Historically, students have often been assigned the 'grunt work' that was needed to support staff research, such as transcribing videos or recruiting participants. While these tasks are necessary for the completion of the project, they tend to assign students with work that does not require advanced skills or knowledge, while academics and researchers have the privilege of designing the research and coding and analysing data (Austin, 2002). However, if the aim of SSP is for students to acquire skills and knowledge of the research process, as well as being engaged authentically as partners, then they need to also be involved in the higher order tasks associated with conducting research.

Challenging the traditional dynamic between staff and students can be troubling for both staff and students (Cook-Sather, 2014). For staff, changing how they relate to and

work with students can threaten their power and authority, which may explain why they often cast students in less significant roles. For students, there can be an anxiety when they are given more responsibility since they have been socialised to see the educator as an expert, while they are an empty vessel to be filled with knowledge (Freire, 1970; Allin, 2014; Dickerson, Jarvis & Stockwell, 2016). However, challenging this power dynamic can be a transformative experience for students and staff and open them up to thinking and working in different ways (Cook-Sather, 2014).

Due to the disruptive nature of SSP and the difficulty of challenging the norms of the university, those engaging in partnership would benefit from praxis, which is a cycle that encourages continual critique and interrogation of their practice. By engaging with theory, putting that theory into practice, and then reflecting on how it went, staff can check that their strategy is fit-for-purpose and fulfilling the aims of the project. Due to the dynamic nature of collaboration (Allin, 2014) and SSP, it is necessary to regularly reflect on theory and action at different phases of the project, as roles and power continue to shift. One could argue that GTAs might be hyperaware of these shifts in power as they engage in ongoing negotiations of expertise and practice through their dual role as students and staff. In this sense, they may find it easier to adapt to and enact power shifts within SSP, which is especially important because there is no one-size-fits-all approach to SSP—staff need to think about how SSP can be applied in their context, considering the discipline, level of study and purpose of the project or course.

## **Exploring Power: Apprenticeship versus Partnership**

While there are definite overlaps between collaboration and SSP, there are some subtle but important differences in the roles of students and academics and how these are related to the power they hold. In research collaboration, the student is often perceived as an apprentice or a less knowledgeable other, while academics are portrayed as the lead of the project or the expert (Healey, Flint & Harrington, 2014). These roles have been engrained in academia for centuries and are unsurprisingly difficult to change despite the recent move toward a more student-centred approach. In SSP, students are positioned as partners and while in reality that doesn't always mean an equal power dynamic, an SSP approach can open up novel ways in which students can be engaged and valued for their contributions.

Drawing on the work of Arnstein (1969: 216), it is possible to see how different kinds of engagement with students can be more or less authentic, highlighting the difference between “going through the empty ritual of participation and having the real power needed to affect the outcome of the process”. When power is redistributed to all those involved in the project, everyone benefits (Arnstein, 1969). Different levels of participation are conceptualised as a ladder, which ranges from ‘manipulation’ to ‘citizen control’. Arnstein (1969) considers the two bottom rungs of the ladder, ‘manipulation’ and ‘therapy’, to describe levels of inauthentic participation where those involved are being ‘educated’ by more experienced participants. Fielding (2001) echoes this in his work, stating that although teachers might have good intentions, interest in student voice and input can often take on more sinister connotations of control or accountability.

The next two levels involve ‘informing’ and ‘consultation’, whereby students might be given a voice in order to inform policies or changes, but they have no power to make these changes themselves. This is again where issues of misrepresentation and misunderstanding come in, as staff may take student voice and transform it to meet their own purposes or agenda (Fielding, 2001). ‘Partnership’ is further up the ladder and, according to Arnstein (1969: 221), power is redistributed here. In addition to a negotiation of power between the citizens and those in charge (students and staff, respectively) “they agree to share planning and decision-making responsibilities”. Here we can see that in an authentic partnership, students should be more wholly engaged in the planning of the initiatives, possibly even identifying the problem and figuring out how to solve it themselves with the support of staff. Partnership, therefore, is actively engaging students as experts and co-producers in the project (Dunne et al., 2011) rather than just consulting them on their experience or using them to do the undesirable work of the project. Looking at Arnstein’s (1969) typology, apprenticeship might fall on the lower rungs of the ladder, where students are enticed to participate in the project in order to gain experience or to benefit from the expertise of those with more power. This is not to say that students cannot benefit from this kind of work, but they would likely get more from a more equitable dynamic with staff who involve them in decision-making and planning of the work.

This relates to Fielding’s (1999, 2001) concept of radical collegiality, which explains the reciprocal dynamic of partnership and how it involves learning from and with students and is more than just collaborating with them. Fielding (1999, 2001) makes a distinction between

collaboration and collegiality, arguing that “since the driving motive of collaboration is fundamentally instrumental and focused strongly on intended gains, those operating in this mode are typically intolerant of time spent on anything other than the task in hand” (Fielding, 1999: 17). Collegiality, on the other hand, allows room for work that benefits those involved, which transforms collaboration into “a joint undertaking informed by the ideals and aspirations of a collective practice infused by value rationality and the commitment to valued social ends” (Fielding, 1999: 17). Inherent in this concept is the idea that students (and GTAs) have something unique and valuable to bring to the partnership, thus challenging the idea that the staff member has more expertise and thus more power.

By acknowledging the contribution that students and GTAs can make based on their own knowledge and experience, staff can move toward a more reciprocal approach to knowledge. Although this might be difficult because it is reinforced by practices and interactions within the university (Allin, 2014), partnership work has the potential to challenge this dynamic, especially when involving GTAs that may act as a bridge between different levels of expertise and different kinds of experience. However, according to Austin (2002), universities may be avoiding radical collegiality when it comes to the experience of GTAs, tending to instead focus on instrumental outcomes rather than GTA development when including them in teaching and research opportunities. Austin (2002) suggests that the professional development of GTAs is often sacrificed in the name of student satisfaction, with more time spent teaching on undergraduate modules that do not challenge GTAs professionally or encourage the development of new teaching approaches or content. To some extent, GTAs might be seen as a source of cheap labour



rather than future academics that are in need of professional development and support from future colleagues. SSP could offer a way to more authentically develop GTAs as members of the academic community while simultaneously fostering a more inclusive environment for students at varying levels who are involved in projects. However, care needs to be taken to ensure that SSP isn't another unpaid and underappreciated mode of engagement delegated to GTAs.

### **GTAs: Bridging the gap between teachers and students in SSP?**

Due to the rising number of students undertaking undergraduate degrees in the UK, universities are increasingly relying on GTAs to carry some of the teaching load. Despite the long-held place of GTAs in teaching in universities in the United States, the role GTAs play in the university is not well-researched. However, there have been recent contributions in this area (Park & Ramos, 2002; Muzuka, 2009; Winter et al., 2015; Standen, 2018). There has been some suggestion that GTAs can act as a bridge between staff and students, helping to narrow the power differential that students experience on their courses (Standen, 2018). In addition to their liminal position in the traditional student-staff dynamic, GTAs are also currently students themselves, and have engaged in undergraduate education more recently than more senior staff members, giving them "additional awareness and knowledge of what might work best for students in this setting" (Muzaka, 2009: 4), which could make their teaching more relevant and engaging.

Therefore, GTAs are in a unique position, especially when it comes to pedagogy. While some research (Austin, 2002) suggests that GTAs in certain disciplines are more likely to

hold positions that involve little autonomy and room for decision-making, for example, leading a seminar after a lecture delivered by staff, other work has shown that GTAs are more likely to be open to innovative teaching approaches and technologies. Research by Austin (2002) revealed the influence of the GTA's locus of control, self-efficacy and ability to connect with others on their development as members of the academic community. This tension between constraint and autonomy highlights the precarious position of GTAs, who may be aware of engaging and useful approaches, but might feel powerless to implement them. It also highlights the transformative potential of working with GTAs to improve courses and programmes—having a fresh perspective can often be instrumental in pedagogical development and would also help to foster self-efficacy and a sense of belonging in the academic community.

### **Case Studies: SSP from two different positions**

Over the course of my doctoral study, I participated in three SSP projects, two of which I will describe here to exemplify the contrast in the power dynamics in different kinds of collaboration and from different positions within the partnership. The first case was the development of a peer mentoring scheme for doctoral students that I originally co-developed with another PhD student. While we had a staff partner, they played a minor role in our project and let us take the lead to consult, pilot and design a truly student-led mentor programme. We had institutional funding for the project, which I applied for based on my own experience of the lack of support and community amongst doctoral students in my department. After conducting research on mentor programmes at other universities, as well as collecting data through focus groups with more experienced

PhD students as well as students who were new to the programme, my project partner and I designed a pilot programme consisting of small-group coffee dates to enable students to make social connections and share their experience and knowledge of being a new doctoral student with their peers, one of whom was at least in their second year of the PhD or EdD. Feedback from students after the pilot fed into our design of the programme that was then embedded within the doctoral support provision in our department. I continued to run the Doctoral Community (as we later called ourselves) over the next couple of years, tweaking the design and adding workshops and networking events to address student feedback, which involved working closely with the programme leader for doctoral provision.

In this case, my project partner and I had almost complete control over the design and management of the project in its early phases, which is relatively rare in most SSP projects. This may have been because we were PhD students, and were therefore expected to have some level of expertise when it came to the design of research. Our staff partner was the department graduate tutor, and therefore had a fair amount of knowledge about the experiences and needs of doctoral students. While she approved of the project, she felt it was important that it was truly student-led, and therefore took a backseat in the project. As more experienced doctoral students, we were able to build upon our own experience of transitioning into doctoral study to help inform the design of the project and what might be needed to support those who were just starting out. This involved a level of praxis as we applied theory such as Lave & Wenger's (1991) communities of practice to our actions within the Doctoral Community, which then helped to inform changes made.

In the second year of the Doctoral Community, I started teaching on an MA Education programme at my institution, which also impacted my approach to supporting fellow doctoral students and vice versa. In my tutorials with masters level students I was able to facilitate and cultivate a sense of community and solidarity based on my work with mentees in the Doctoral Community, as well as my own experience of being an international masters student in the UK. I had also gained experience discussing and interrogating different research approaches through dialogues with mentees, which proved useful when helping MA students design research projects. The student-led approach of the Doctoral Community also inspired me to solicit feedback and engage in reflection about my practice to improve my supervision and teaching on the MA.

The second SSP project that I was a part of was a multileveled project that built on a previous book project done within my institution on research-based education (RBE) (see Tong, Standen and Sotiriou, 2018). The three tiers consisted of (1) staff members who ran the original project, (2) GTAs that also participated in the original project and (3) a group of postgraduate and undergraduate students who were new to the project. My role was in the second tier, as a GTA facilitating and supporting a small group of students as they learned more about RBE. Building on a book that showcased RBE at our institution, we invited students to participate in the second phase of the project which involved reading the introductory chapters of the book, identifying a theme of interest and conducting a focus group exploring this theme at the book launch. This focus group data was then used to draw up online resources aimed at a multi-disciplinary audience who might want to implement a RBE approach in their teaching. This project was much more

complex as it involved three levels of partners, spanned across disciplines and tried to connect two phases of the project. Due to this complexity, the project struggled to completion. In my group, one of the students didn't show up to the event and then dropped out of the project, which meant that I took on more responsibility within the group, potentially undermining the SSP dynamic. Other groups had similar problems, and although some of the students produced work that could be adapted later, we only produced one resource that was suitable for disseminating. It could also be that because the student partners were not involved in shaping the project design and purpose, they were not fully invested in it and therefore it was not a priority for them.

The role of GTAs within this project was also complex because there were parts of the project where I felt like we were engaged as partners, while at other times I felt we were engaged in 'therapy' or even 'manipulation' (Arnstein, 1968). Because we were working within a larger project, the design, content and output of the project were relatively fixed—although student partners were encouraged to pick themes that were of interest to them, we still had to work within the frame of the book launch to collect 'data' to inform our resource. This felt like an example of 'therapy', wherein students who knew about RBE (the GTAs) were educating those who were lacking understanding in this area. However, other aspects of the project felt closer to a partnership. For instance, when the students led the focus groups based on their own questions and interests, creating an opportunity for them to guide the project and also participate in data collection and analysis. Reflecting on the project I realise that I found this tension between autonomy and constraint to be particularly challenging. Because I had been a student in a

SSP before, I was keen to give the students as much autonomy and power as possible, especially considering the constraints that were already built into the project. Yet this laissez-faire attitude may have contributed to the lack of engagement, as perhaps I didn't support or guide students as much as they needed. Perhaps working with students as a student myself might have been a better way forward, instead of positioning myself as the leader of our group.

My own experience as a GTA engaging in SSP demonstrates the tension between autonomy and constraint. In the Doctoral Community, we had almost complete autonomy to design the project the way we thought was best, with minimal input from the staff partner, meaning that my role in this project exemplified what Arnstein (1969) referred to as citizen control. In contrast, my role on the RBE project was relatively constrained by the parameters of the project, which were set out by the staff leads. In this sense, the project typified Arnstein's (1969: 220) 'placation', wherein GTAs have some influence over the project, letting them "advise or plan ad infinitum but retain for powerholders the right to judge the legitimacy or feasibility of the advice". This tension between autonomy and constraint was echoed in my GTA teaching experience on a large general education master's programme that had been running for several years when I joined the team. While this was an amazing experience and offered the opportunity to learn more about HE pedagogy within the structure of an existing programme, it also left very little room for innovation and change on an individual level. This is another element that makes the liminal space that the GTA occupies challenging—while you are still gaining experience and pedagogical knowledge, you are sometimes not respected by more experienced staff

members or by students (Allin, 2014). This can influence your confidence which also impacts teaching (Cho et al. 2011).

## **Recommendations**

In terms of working with GTAs in partnership, a particular focus on power might be needed as staff may take it for granted that the power dynamic between staff and GTAs is already more equitable, which doesn't seem to be the case (Austin, 2002). Based on the literature around radical collegiality and GTA professional development, a focus on the process rather than the product is another important recommendation that can perhaps help to ensure that GTAs are benefitting from the project rather than being 'placated' or 'manipulated' (Arnstein, 1969). Learning from my own experiences with partnership, this can be fostered by engaging student partners (whether GTAs or not) in the project at all stages, through design, implementation and dissemination. Not only is this characteristic of a true partnership, but it is also important for the academic development of students. Being a part of the project from start to finish also allows students to truly feel like they are a part of a community working toward a shared goal, which is instrumental in fostering a sense of community and self-efficacy in students and GTAs.

When GTAs are engaged in partnership work with other students, power is still a key consideration, and should not simply be ignored since both participants are students. While closer to other students in terms of their identity and experience, GTAs still have more power due to their expertise and should interrogate how they use this in the partnership. In my own experience working with other students in partnership, I found that while I was hyperaware of trying to share responsibility, this was often met with

confusion or resistance from students who felt I was a more knowledgeable and experienced partner. Healey, Flint & Harrington (2014: 15) assert that “as a concept and a practice, partnership works to counter a deficit model where staff take on the role of enablers of disempowered students... aiming instead to acknowledge differentials of power while valuing individual contributions from students and staff in a shared process of reciprocal learning and working”. GTAs may be uniquely positioned to value contributions from fellow students, but they should also not ignore the importance of reciprocity and challenging traditional power hierarchies.

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