Research article

Igniting social pedagogy through learning and teaching partnerships in a higher education context

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Abstract

Partnership as an approach to pedagogic practice and co-creation in higher education is an orientation towards relationship-centred education. There is little exploration of social pedagogy in the higher education (post-secondary) context, yet recent research studied the similarities between the guiding principles underpinning learning and teaching partnerships and those of social pedagogy. This article presents the results of this empirical research, which explored the complexities of engaging 'students as partners' in learning and teaching in a UK university. This research found that partnership was used as an approach to democratise entrenched power relations in faculty–student relationships, empower a diverse student body to become co-creators of knowledge and foster inclusive learning communities that respect diversity and social inclusion. The three key concepts of democracy, agency and community are pillars of social pedagogy. Through this exploration of social pedagogy within the higher education context, there

is significant potential for knowledge exchange between disciplines traditionally allied to social pedagogy, such as social work, K-12 education, youth work and higher education. The article develops a unique definition and conceptual framework for the case of learning and teaching partnerships, utilising social pedagogy as a guiding theoretical lens. An overview of the novel methodological approach of situational analysis is given, followed by a discussion of the key implications for higher education that: (1) learning and teaching partnerships are situated, relational and inherently complex; (2) 'trajectories' provide a helpful metaphor to conceptualise individuals' unique journeys through the process of partnership; and (3) relationship-centred higher education practices involve heightened awareness of the role of emotions.

Keywords relational learning; students as partners; higher education; partnership; compassionate pedagogies; social pedagogy

Introduction

The concept of engaging 'students as partners' has developed in the higher education system in the UK, as well as in Scandinavia, Australasia, Canada and the United States, most noticeably since 2014. Framed within discourses associated with student engagement, working in partnership with students is now referenced in UK governmental regulation and guidance documents such as the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework, a national quality audit conducted by the Office for Students. These regulatory systems require UK universities to evidence how students are engaged and encouraged to work in partnership with their teachers in the classroom, with educational developers for the purposes of curriculum enhancement and with senior leaders at the level of university governance. There is an assumption across political and educational literature that partnership can mitigate the neoliberal and commodified environment of higher education (Holen et al., 2021). Terms such as collaborator, co-creator, co-producer and change agent are often used interchangeably alongside 'partner'. Yet a concerning barrier to pedagogical progress in this domain has been the lack of clear definition of partnership, how partnership is experienced and what engaged and partnered practices should involve (Buckley, 2014). Furthermore, student partnership continues to suffer from a lack of solid theoretical base (Matthews et al., 2019), which has contributed to an erratic adoption and uptake of partnership practices.

This article presents the results of empirical research exploring 'students as partners' in learning and teaching, when used as an approach to democratise entrenched power relations in faculty–student relationships, empower a diverse student body to become co-creators of knowledge and foster inclusive learning communities which respect diversity and social inclusion. The article presents a unique definition and conceptual framework for the case of learning and teaching partnerships, utilising social pedagogy, compassion-focused and critical-radical pedagogies as guiding theoretical lenses. The discussion raises three key implications for higher education, that: (1) learning and teaching partnerships are situated, relational and inherently complex; (2) 'trajectories' provides a helpful metaphor to conceptualise individuals' unique journeys through the process of partnership; and (3) relationship-centred higher education practices involve heightened awareness of the role of emotions.

Framing partnership as pedagogy in higher education

Much of the associated literature containing definitions and interpretations of students as partners in higher education has been published since 2014 (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017) and tends towards the humanities and social sciences, and even business management disciplines, to articulate the student–staff relationship.

> Partnership [in higher education] is framed as a process of student engagement, understood as staff and students learning and working together to foster engaged student learning and engaging learning and teaching enhancement. In this sense partnership is a relationship in

which all participants are actively engaged in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together. (Healey et al., 2014, p. 7)

Much less discussed are the influences of critical and radical pedagogies, and these continue to challenge the entrenched hierarchical relationships on which higher education pedagogies are traditionally based. The connection between higher education and social pedagogy has remained largely undiscovered in the UK higher education system, despite sharing many of the associated values, such as being concerned with relationship-based practice (Bovill, 2020; Gravett, 2022), social justice and inclusion (Cook-Sather, 2020), personal development and collective growth (Peters, 2016).

Critical pedagogy is widely understood as a philosophy of education that views teaching as a political act, heavily influenced by the works of Paulo Freire (1997) and bell hooks (1994). The ideals of student–staff partnership undoubtedly draw on Freirean concepts of transformative education and anti-oppressive principles, advocating more humanist and emancipatory practices in a learning and teaching relationship based on mutual recognition (hooks, 1994). Focused on removing oppressive barriers to learning among marginalised groups, Freire (1972) argued against the pervasive 'banking' analogy of traditional education systems involving the deposit of narration (for example, information) by teachers into the receptacles (for example, students) of content. To overcome increasing teacher dominance and student passivity, Freire proposed a radically alternative education founded on reconciling the teacher–student contradiction – to reconfigure the relationship so that both are simultaneously teachers and students. Taking critical pedagogy further, radical pedagogy, also founded in Freirean educational principles, does not rest at a simple reordering of the teacher–student relationship, but attempts to actively engage and develop critical awareness of cultural practices and social structures which reaffirm privilege and domination (Sweet, 1998).

The ideals of radical educational practice reimagine higher education as eradicating lectures in favour of making opportunity for dialogue and debate, removing teacher-led testing and grading, alongside incorporating personal reflection and reflexivity into learning and teaching, particularly in terms of applying critical perspectives towards social change (Freire, 1972, 1997; Giroux, 1997). Centring all or part of the curriculum, assignment briefs and assessments on topics such as societal inequalities, anti-oppression and democratisation across all subjects requires commitment from whole teams and departments (Sweet, 1998). Those wishing to adopt radical teaching and learning practices often face both implicit and overt institutional discouragement towards radical pedagogies (Gaianguest, 1998). As such, existing processes, such as course and module validation, and those involved as wider stakeholders, such as external examiners, need to be appropriately prepared to understand the different learning outcomes arising out of radically and ethically focused methods. Examples of pedagogic practices in the literature which are more conducive to radical outcomes include engaging in critical co-investigation of social justice issues, shared reflection and reflexivity through contemplative and mindful pedagogies (Berila, 2015). Furthermore, culturally responsive higher education in which teachers are attuned to their own social, educational and philosophical identity, advocates that students should be able to bring their extended lives into the classroom as a rich and reflective part of the curriculum context (Gay, 2018). Existing methods of appraising teaching practice and the student experience, such as mid- or end-of-module evaluations lack appropriate indicators that commend radical teaching approaches. Contemporary higher education faces a compromising position when high value is placed on the skills and competencies derived from fact-based curricula, such as through examinations and rote-learning assessments, despite the urgent need to equip graduates with critical awareness, empathy and listening skills, as well as the ability to understand and critique social structures.

The integration of compassion, kindness and empowerment within the curriculum is an evolving discussion in current literature on higher education pedagogies (Gibbs, 2017; Maratos et al., 2019), which is highly relevant to both social pedagogy and the context of working–learning partnership. The concept of compassionate pedagogies advocates that educators bring their 'whole-self' to teaching, ensuring that there is enough time and space for authentic dialogue, critical reflection and opportunities for emotionally connected engagement alongside purely subject-driven curriculum. This extends to the environments of learning, prompting educators to notice sensory stress, opportunities for movement and self-care breaks, as well as noticing learners' strengths and harnessing these to scaffold participation and engagement (Hamilton and Petty, 2023). Through paying attention to compassion and the social learning spaces of partnership, educators can actively pursue critical conversations, encourage challenging and

problem-based issues to push further in order to engage uncertainty in the pursuit of making a difference to individuals, communities and the wider world (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2020).

Aligning partnership and social pedagogy

Having studied the similarities between the guiding values underpinning partnership and those of social pedagogy, it is possible to see the potential for knowledge exchange between these two concepts (see Figure 1). Social pedagogy, a widely recognised approach to human development and lifelong learning across many Central European countries (Kornbeck and Jensen, 2009), is an orientation to participatory practices. Primarily concerned with well-being, learning and growth, social pedagogy is focused on the strengths and meaningful contributions every individual can make to their wider community (ThemPra, 2015). To date there has been limited exploration of social pedagogy in the UK education context (Moss and Petrie, 2019), less so in post-secondary settings, yet creating a nurturing environment for learning and growth is a mutual concern. Adopting a social pedagogical approach presents some challenges within higher education; the constraints of a pre-defined curriculum, navigating institutional structures, policies and processes and culturally inherited expectations of what education should involve and how it should be 'delivered'. At the heart of social pedagogy is a conceptual framework concerned with taking an ethical position on practice, policy decisions and orientations that are made about how best to support and educate others (Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2011).

Figure 1. A shared values framework: social pedagogy and partnership values in higher education (Source: Adapted from ThemPra, 2015 and Healey et al., 2016, p. 2)
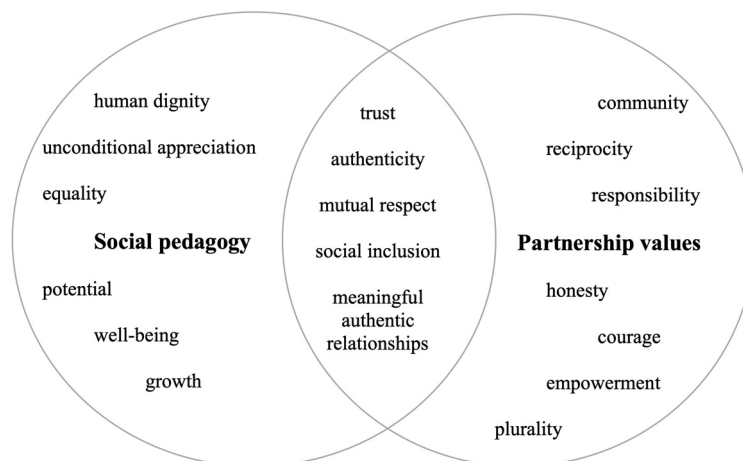
Research context and methods

This study adopted situational analysis from Clarke (2005), a novel approach to grounded theory to develop original understandings of the interpretations of a learning and teaching partnership in the context of an undergraduate course in a sport business discipline, delivered in a single UK higher education institution. Situational analysis focuses on the broader situation as the unit of analysis and allows the researcher to generate theory that is interpreted from socio-cultural, political and discursive perspectives (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Situational matrix (Source: Clarke, 2005, p. 73)
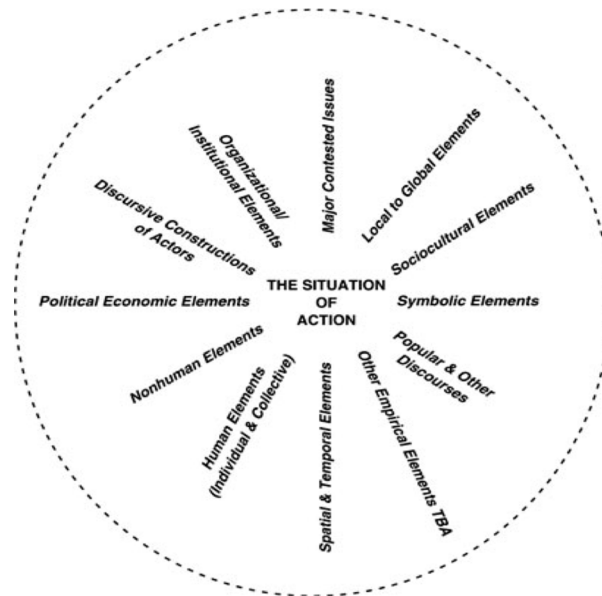
It was particularly important in this study to utilise the opportunity in situational analysis to analyse the collective power relations, attend to who is present and who/which groups might be marginalised or silenced. This provided the opportunity to enquire into unconsidered or new insights about partnership, as well as the complexities, nuances and relational issues – all of which are entangled within lived experiences of those involved in a partnership but often under-reported in research literature.

Over a longitudinal period of 16 months the following data were collected with the aim of observing and recording the situational elements within this partnership example.

Taking into account the situated nature of partnership practices, and drawing on observations and supporting documentary analysis, this research generated an interpretive analysis of partnership involving the experiences of a course leader and 11 undergraduate students actively working and learning together (see Table 1). Following the university's Research Ethics Policy, an application for ethical review and approval was made (14 December 2014). An inductive analysis of the data using the constant comparison method (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) allowed for meanings, patterns and theories to be thematically developed from the ground up; and analytical mapping and diagramming was used to establish relationships between categories found in the analysis.

Table 1. Data collection inventory

Description of data	Population details
Two focus groups (transcribed)	First-year undergraduate (n = 6) Final-year undergraduate (n = 5)
Two open-ended interviews (transcribed)	Course leader (academic staff member) interviewed twice across the study
Three observations of teaching (field notes)	First-year seminar (induction) Second-year seminar (placement briefing) Third-year seminar (dissertation briefing)

Results

This section is presented according to the early themes derived from the constant comparison analysis method, and begins with a short introduction to the partnership setting. Extracts from the interviews and focus groups are included for illustrative purposes.

The partnership setting

This case study involved an examination of the learning and teaching relationship arising between a course leader and the students across an undergraduate course of study in a sport business discipline. This instance is of an emerging partnership approach, fostered through the everyday practices and interactions of teaching, and focuses on the pedagogical approaches taken by the course leader.

Relational aspects of pedagogy

The types of pedagogic approaches which were observed in seminars, and described by participants, fostered partnership through an emphasis on relational pedagogy. This involved the staff member providing regular opportunities for in-class debates on contemporary issues, and actively involving students in class agenda setting. Students valued plenty of speaking and listening activities in pairs and small groups:

> Every week we would always talk about current issues in the sporting world, so you really felt up to date and really engaged. We were covering issues like law and stakeholders, marketing, the golden triangle, media. (Final-year student)

Discussing social and political affairs was cited as an activity that progressed and strengthened relations between students and staff, and while occasionally causing disagreements or dissenting perspectives, actively engaging with opposing views meant that the group had to learn to self-moderate, as well as to develop skills such as negotiation, listening and appreciation of other people's opinions. It was observed that it fell to the staff member to mediate differences of opinion, facilitate respectful group discussion and role model diplomacy, and notice and tactfully address micro-aggressions.

In addition to these activities, the teaching sessions observed revealed underlying values characterising the relational approach taken by the course leader, such as respectful dialogue and treating students with humility and dignity. A strengths-based approach was apparent within the seminars, such as drawing on students' existing knowledge and skills, rather than deficits or assumptions, as well as the creation of a learning community within and across cohorts through peer learning (student-led, small-group learning).

One student made an interesting reflection on his relationship with staff, explaining that for them, building a mutual interest as a two-way process involved taking an interest in staff's research and areas of specialism, and:

> To expect the other staff to want to build a relationship with you is unrealistic unless you can offer something back. (Final-year student)

Collective problem-solving

When students were actively involved in the classroom in collective problem-solving, their awareness of the complexities behind certain recurring structural issues increased and, in some cases, translated into a sense of empathy and insight into the work of their staff partners. Likewise, the course leader talking to students about their experiences, and hearing about their personal situations, developed greater mutual understanding and appreciation of the complex contemporary issues that university students are facing.

> One of the first things to do is sit down and start talking to them [students], because there is a big generation gap, there is a big expectations difference; [for staff] there is an understanding and comprehension gap. (Course leader)

The pedagogic approaches to collective problem-solving included enquiry-based and problem-based learning, whereby the tutor facilitated group debates and learning scenarios around particular topics in

the media. Both first-year and final-year students were keen to describe their positive experiences in classes that incorporated controversial issues in the discipline. One student went as far as to describe what they valued in terms of a generative approach to setting a collaborative seminar agenda:

> What he did really well and I don't think we had from any other lecturers was, he wasn't teaching off a script. We would come to his lessons and he wouldn't be telling us what he wanted to teach us, he would be asking us what we want him to teach us. (Final-year student)

Undermining actions

In contrast, students described instances that felt antithetical to the partnership environment and orientation. Undermining actions provided a blunt contrast to how individuals had been treated in partnership (for example, with respect, trust, familiarity) and made the concept of what felt like being in partnership (or not), all the more salient. For example, first-year students in the focus group were upset that some lecturers would 'put them down' in front of their peers if they were late for class, or if they answered a question incorrectly in a seminar.

> There is a bit of a power trip with a couple of the tutors that I've observed. When you're trying to have a group discussion in class, and you're trying to make a point that's necessary, and you're not trying to be stupid or funny, then they shut you down like 'raise your hand', then they move onto the next person. Then you kind of sink into your seat, and like you don't want to raise your hand again, I don't want to engage, I don't want to come to your lessons. (First-year student)

Finally, the student participants identified several affirming actions taken across the course, which they felt promoted their learning, growth and sense of belonging: personal academic tutoring that took a coaching approach to their individual progression; opportunities for professional learning such as partnering with employers on 'live' briefs and work placements, connecting the curriculum to the vocational context; attending weekly informal course leader drop-ins located in the campus café to promote informal discussion about well-being and increased social interaction opportunities; and weekly one-to-one and small-group dissertation supervision led by the course leader who encouraged students to set the agenda for these sessions based on their academic needs.

The next section assembles these early themes, which are characterised by the actions and behaviours of students and staff, and groups them into an overarching thematic definition with three strands encompassing the partnership situation, the trajectory and the role of emotion.

Discussion

This research explored the qualitative experiences of students and a faculty member involved in a higher education learning and teaching relationship described as a partnership. The findings recognise the situated nature of the partnership and the potential environmental influences of the surrounding context. In this case partnership was used as a way to describe democratised power relations in faculty–student relationships, empower a diverse student body to become co-creators of knowledge and foster an inclusive learning community which respects diversity and social inclusion. The key concepts of democracy, agency and community are pillars of social pedagogy, and through this exploration it has been useful to draw parallels with educational partnerships and to discuss the affordances of introducing social pedagogy discourses into the higher education sphere. The following three overarching themes emerged from the analysis of the partnership situation.

Learning and teaching partnerships are situated, relational and inherently complex

The nature of the partnership was found to be highly defined by the context in which it was situated, and crucially by the individual staff member involved. The course leader used their professional influence to steer the partnership environment, with students being 'brought on board' through forms of recruitment. It was difficult to avoid the fact that across the findings, forms of relational control resided most of the time with the staff member, and ultimately within the confines of institutional authority. The power to negotiate, therefore, was unevenly distributed between staff and student partners, despite the desires

expressed to empower students to become active agents in the partnership process. Being able to trust their teachers and being spoken to with care and dignity was highly regarded by students as an authentic partnership experience. Crucially, the chance to interact frequently and engage in mutual dialogue increased students' feelings of involvement and likelihood that partnership was being conducted.

'Trajectories' provides a helpful metaphor to conceptualise journeys through partnership

'Trajectories' is used to acknowledge the multiple directions that partnership took in this study. The concept of trajectories takes a journeying, or life-course perspective, on the evolving nature of partnerships. The trajectory involves six sub-categories, expressed as 'phases' of partnership: establishing; inhibiting; facilitating; perpetuating; transforming; and accelerating, each characterised by a unique set of conditions or circumstances. For example, the *establishing* phase is signified by its centrality to partnership as a foundational phase. At this early point in the partnership, emphasis was placed on creating core conditions for well-functioning partnerships, such as through establishing a relationship, connection, trust and intentions. However, within the *inhibiting* phase it was evident that some student–staff relationships never quite got off the ground before the opportunity for any interaction, particularly poignant for students where this left them feeling disenfranchised and excluded.

The *facilitating* phase involved actions or behaviours found to facilitate partnership practices and built upon the core conditions established at the beginning. The staff partner was more likely to set up facilitative opportunities or use resources to enable this phase, such as guiding a conversation towards relevant current affairs or orienting a discussion to reflect on group boundaries. The techniques and skills observably contributing to this phase included active listening, having a flexible agenda, encouraging inclusive dialogue and engaging with contemporary issues. Attending to the debriefing process to develop meta-understandings of learning or working together contributed to an environment of acceptance, and cultivated a sense of trust and shared ownership of learning, as opposed to an atmosphere of individualism.

A phase particularly evident in the data was the notion of *perpetuating* certain inclusive or exclusive behaviours. Attending to positions taken in the data, and to marginalised, silenced and absent voices through situational analysis, pointed clearly to this phase of replication of structural and social norms, including the existence of in-groups and biases, favouritism and privileging. Actively acknowledging and working against this phase was probably the hardest of any along the trajectory, but by far the most important in terms of democracy, equality of opportunity and creating diverse learning communities. When partners actively acknowledged that they were involved in a *transforming* process, it created an atmosphere of recognition that transformation was taking place. Activities and actions appeared in the data which facilitated transformation, such as acknowledging and discussing knowledge gaps, demonstrating commitment, collectively reflecting and moving beyond the typical positions of staff and student.

The final phase of partnership trajectories involved the notion of momentum, facilitated by particular activities and types of discussion. The *accelerating* phase implies moving beyond the partnership's expected interactions, tasks or learning outcomes. For example, incorporating the unexpected, or debating contemporary issues appeared to shift the internal focus of the partnership towards externality, 'looking outwards' or bringing an outside focus within. Safe spaces and adequate time were needed to be able to experiment with ideas, explore failures and challenges, which led in some instances to a reimagining of solutions to previously held problems.

Relationship-centred higher education practices involve heightened awareness of the role of emotions

The presence of emotion was an aspect woven throughout the data, and although there is not scope to explore it fully in this article, it was found to be a key component in the success or failure of the participants' sense of partnership. Recognising the role of emotion has offered another space to acknowledge the affective elements and emotional dynamics inherent in the learning and teaching relationships in this study. Social pedagogy advocates for an active involvement and responsiveness to individuals' feelings, emotions and attitudes within social relationships in the educational environment (Moss and Petrie, 2019). However, the role of emotion is rarely acknowledged in the field of students as partners (Felten, 2017), suggesting that emotion is not a commonly studied facet of partnership. The presence and articulation of emotions deep-rooted in the data in this study steered a further focused analysis and interpretation of the role of emotion in partnership work (McConnell, 2022), corresponding

with a small number of empirical studies that have also encountered emotional presence in partnership. These studies explore how the very acknowledgement of emotion can support resilience and well-being (Hill et al., 2019) as well as to foster appreciation and a sense of feeling accepted and valued (Hermsen et al., 2017).

Conclusions

Focusing on the relational dynamic between educator and learner, whether that is articulated as partnership or not, begins to illuminate the necessary elements for productive relationships that acknowledge the wider human and social contexts in which education takes place. When looking at education from a social pedagogical perspective, Moss and Petrie (2019) put forward that social pedagogy 'takes account of how social, political and cultural factors underlie policies and provisions and explores how these underpin the educational processes involved in human formation and the professional and other relationships associated with it' (p. 396).

The findings from this study point towards the need for a clearer understanding of the complex factors present in student–staff partnerships, and an appreciation of the potential to draw upon social pedagogical concepts in pursuit of building and sustaining partnership relationships in higher education. It is possible to see the interconnecting principles underpinning both social pedagogy and partnerships, such as the need for those in positions of power to actively pursue the redistribution of power and agency to those in traditionally subordinate positions within the relationship. For teachers across all sectors of education, increased awareness of the complexities and emotional elements present in learning and teaching interactions can support staff to build meaningful relationships with their students (McConnell, 2022), responding to the call for more compassionate pedagogies (Gibbs, 2017) and relationship-rich higher education (Felten and Lambert, 2020). Recognising the fragility of learner–teacher relationships, and working to strengthen relational bonds through partnership and co-creation offers educators and students opportunities for deeper connections. Bringing the social pedagogical framework into higher education has the potential to enhance existing models of partnership practice, and in doing so, create conditions for a deeper and more equitable transformational potential for all those involved.

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Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

This study was approved on 14 December 2014 by the University of Brighton Research Ethics Committee.

Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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