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ARTICLE – ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Enhancing teaching and learning through dialogue: a student and staff partnership model

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This paper explores a model for developing student and staff partnerships to enhance the quality of teaching and learning and situates the model in literature on student engagement. The model enables staff and students to step outside their normal roles and the traditional student-teacher relationship into a less pre-defined mode of interaction and liminal space where conversations about teaching and learning can take place. At the most transformative, this model enables academic staff to get a sense of learner perspectives and to view students as partners and collaborators while students develop insights into the perspectives of staff. The authors argue that the model represents an innovative approach to engaging students in a meaningful way in enhancing teaching and learning and has the potential to reframe the student-teacher relationship into a more collaborative one that goes beyond listening to students.

Keywords: academic development; liminality; partnership; quality enhancement; student engagement

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Introduction

In the United Kingdom, both the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and the National Union of Students (NUS) have called for organisations to explore new ways to engage students in their learning, to involve students in internal quality assurance systems, and in the design and planning of courses (Kay, Dunne & Hutchinson, 2010). As a result of this developing agenda we received funding from the UK Higher Education Academy for a project to develop a model for student engagement in teaching and learning enhancement where students were active partners in shaping the learning experiences in partnership with academic staff. The project aimed to be an example of authentic student engagement where students acted as agents for change (Healey, 2012) and to go beyond listening to students and instead position them as equal and knowledgeable partners in structuring the teaching and learning experience. As Dunne and Zandstra (2011) comment:

The concept of ‘listening to the student voice’ – implicitly if not deliberately – supports the perspective of student as ‘consumer’, whereas ‘students as change agents’ explicitly supports a view of the student as ‘active collaborator’ and ‘co-producer’, with the potential for transformation (Dunne and Zandstra, 2011, p. 4).

We understand partnership to be about repositioning the way that students can contribute to teaching and

learning through including and valuing their perspectives and experiences and by students taking a more active role and leading activities in relationship with staff. In the Student Consultant model, which is a model for partnership, the way that this occurs is through the use of dialogue to develop mutual understanding. This definition of partnership reflects the principles and values of authenticity, reciprocity, empowerment and responsibility, which are some of the core values outlined in the UK Higher Education Academy's 'Framework for student and staff partnerships in learning and teaching in higher education' (2014).

The benefit of providing academics with a source of informed, timely and focussed student feedback to support them in developing their practice has been highlighted by Crawford (2009 and 2012). Crawford's project 'Students consulting on teaching' at the University of Lincoln provided the inspiration for our Student Consultant Project and work from the USA by Cook-Sather (2008, 2011 and 2013) informed the underpinning ideas of student and staff collaboration. Cook-Sather argues that 'inviting students into dialogue about classroom practices with faculty members has the potential to make reflection a collaborative/collegial dynamic between faculty members and student consultants' (Cook-Sather, 2008, p. 476). Our project builds on these approaches, but it differs from the work of Crawford in operating across the University and therefore across the disciplines. Our work draws on the work of Cook-Sather to further develop the idea of liminal space as a site for collaborative teaching and learning development. This paper develops an analysis of what happens when student and staff work together outside their 'normal' roles and provides a practical model that can be adopted and adapted by academic developers in the sector.

In this paper, we will situate the partnership model that we developed in current literature on student engagement. Then we will analyse feedback from students and staff in relation to the roles, interactions and outcomes resulting from the collaborative approach.

What does student engagement mean?

There are different definitions of what student engagement means and this is complicated by the different

historical roots of the term. In a literature review (Trowler, 2010) provides the following definition:

Student engagement is concerned with the interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students and their performance, and reputation of the institution. (Trowler, 2010, p. 10).

Such a definition appears all encompassing and, as Trowler acknowledges, rooted in work from North America and Australasia, where surveys of student engagement are generally used as a measure of student behaviour and institutional practices linked to student achievement and satisfaction. Differences in the paradigms of student engagement is also underlined by Bryson (2011) who argues for an approach that acknowledges that student engagement is much broader than the academic and university environment.

In the UK, the Higher Education Academy is undertaking a pilot of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) developed in North America, which is described as being:

...designed to measure students' participation in activities and practices that are known to relate to improvements in learning. It asks about the amount and quality of effort that students invest in their studies, as well as the extent to which their courses and institutions are supportive and encouraging. (HEA, 2013).

Similarly, the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) measures the time and effort students devote to educationally purposeful activities. Unsurprisingly, there is a lot of debate about the definitions of the items and the scales used in these surveys (Baron & Corbin, 2012; Kahu, 2013). In addition, feedback mechanisms associated with quality assurance and quality enhancement processes, such as the National Student Survey (NSS) and module feedback occur at the end of a learning process and can be characterised as 'impersonal' and 'untimely' (Crawford, 2012, p. 54).

In the UK, alongside the use of student surveys, there is a different tradition where the concept of student engagement has roots in ideas about student representation and student feedback and so is concerned

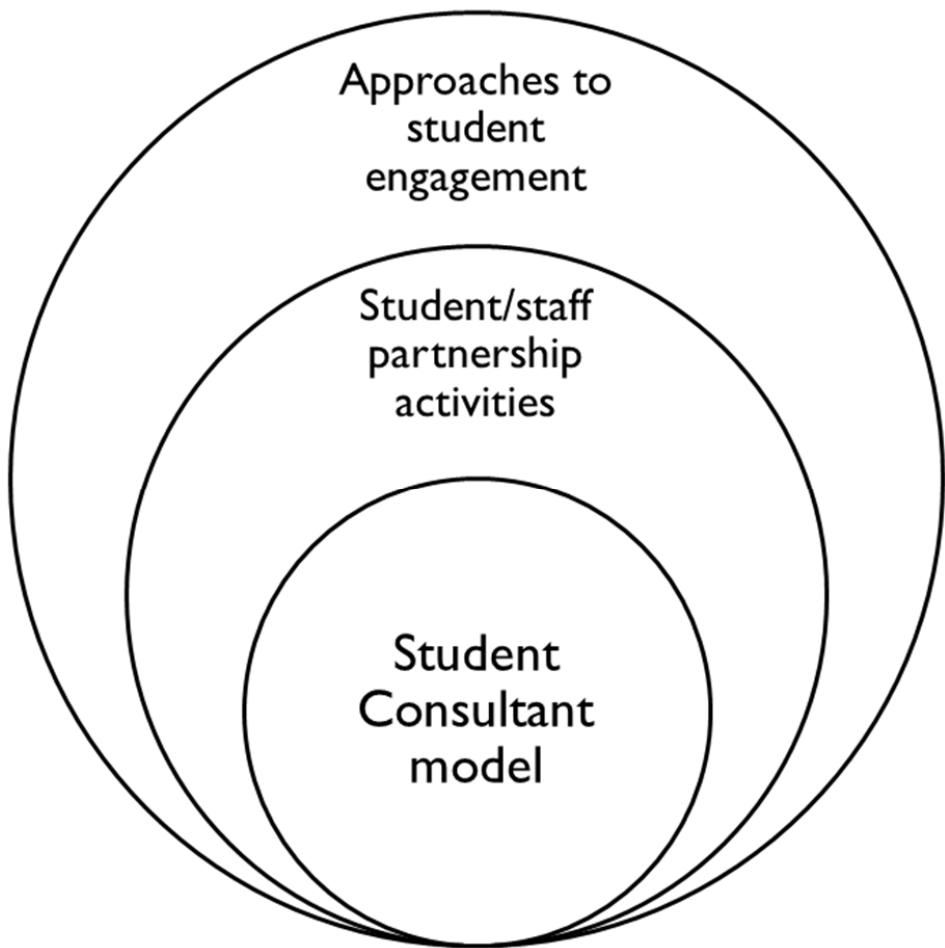
with students being involved in discussions and decision making processes about their course (Trowler, 2010; Robinson, 2012).

The most helpful framework for locating our project is suggested by Healey, O'Connor and Broadfoot (2010, pp. 21-22) who propose three interconnected levels of student engagement which connect student engagement with the process of quality enhancement:

- ‘Micro: engagement in their own learning and that of other students
- Meso: engagement in quality assurance and enhancement processes
- Macro: engagement in strategy development’

We locate our ‘Student Consultants’ project at the ‘meso-level’ because it works beyond the particular experiences of the individual student and is concerned with engaging students (and staff) in quality enhancement of teaching and the learning experience. Similarly, Robinson situates student engagement on a level dealing with enhancement practices and policies in higher education institutions (HEIs) and defines student engagement as something that enable staff to ‘...have a shared responsibility for the development of practices and policies within their HEI, aimed at enhancing the students’ learning and HEI experiences’ (Robinson, 2012, p. 98). Below is a figure illustrating how we understand the areas of student engagement, partnerships along with the Student Consultant model to be interrelated.

Figure 1: Situating student consultants



Notions of student engagement need to be also understood in relation to a dominant political agenda characterised by a neo liberal marketisation of higher education in which students are positioned as 'consumers' of education (Baron & Corbin, 2012; Little, Locke, Scesa & Williams, 2009; Molesworth, 2009). In this discourse, education is a product that students can 'choose' to buy and then rate in terms of how satisfied they are. It engenders a sense of entitlement rather than a commitment to an intellectual endeavour. Neary has developed a pedagogical approach aligned to a political movement identified as 'Student as Producer' that seeks to challenge this discourse and reframes teaching and learning in higher education as "not simply consuming the final product of someone else's labour, but is involved with the entire process of production of knowing" (Neary, 2010, p. 6). In this approach students are essential partners in the sense of

being actively involved in and responsible for teaching and learning processes. Bovill, Cook-Sather & Felten (2011) also put forward the idea of students as ‘co-creators’ as a way to challenge traditional ideas about learners and call for more democratic approaches to engaging students in teaching and learning (Bovill, Cook-Sather & Felten, 2011, p. 133).

Our project similarly aimed to challenge traditional ways that students and lecturers gain feedback on teaching and learning practices and to use consultations as a meaningful way of engaging students and staff in conversations about these teaching and learning practices. Neary and Amsley argue for the design of spaces that ‘promote intimate intellectual interaction between staff and students, undermining the dominating power relations that normally exist in university teaching spaces’ (2012, p. 107) and it is such a space for conversation and relationships that our project seeks to establish.

The student consultants project

The partnership model was developed as part of a UK Higher Education Academy funded project ‘Students as Teaching and Learning Consultants’, which was carried out at a University in the North of England. The aim of our project was to involve students in the enhancement of teaching and learning in a way that complemented other quality assurance and enhancement processes, such as peer review of teaching and module feedback, and was an additional opportunity for academics interested in developing their practice.

The essence of the project is that the students working as Consultants are invited by a member of academic staff to provide a student perspective on an aspect of their teaching and learning practice. During the consultation a dialogue between the student and the member of staff takes place in which they discuss and develop ideas about teaching and learning activities and approaches. The three principle project aims were;

- (1) to promote authentic student engagement in the enhancement of teaching and learning and to explore inspirational teaching. (The ‘inspirational teaching’ of the project is beyond the scope of this paper.)

- (2) to create opportunities for students and staff to engage in reflection and dialogue around teaching and learning approaches;
- (3) to offer academic staff the perspective of a student (at points of need) that goes beyond the typical end of module evaluation response or National Student Survey.

The student consultation project process

The Students' Union recruited eleven students to work as Student Consultants. The students were asked to submit a paragraph about why they were interested in being part of the project and in teaching and learning.

All the students were motivated to improve the experience for their fellow students. Some of the students were already 'course representatives'; a course representative is a student who has been elected by their fellow students to communicate their views on the course to both the University and the Students' Union.

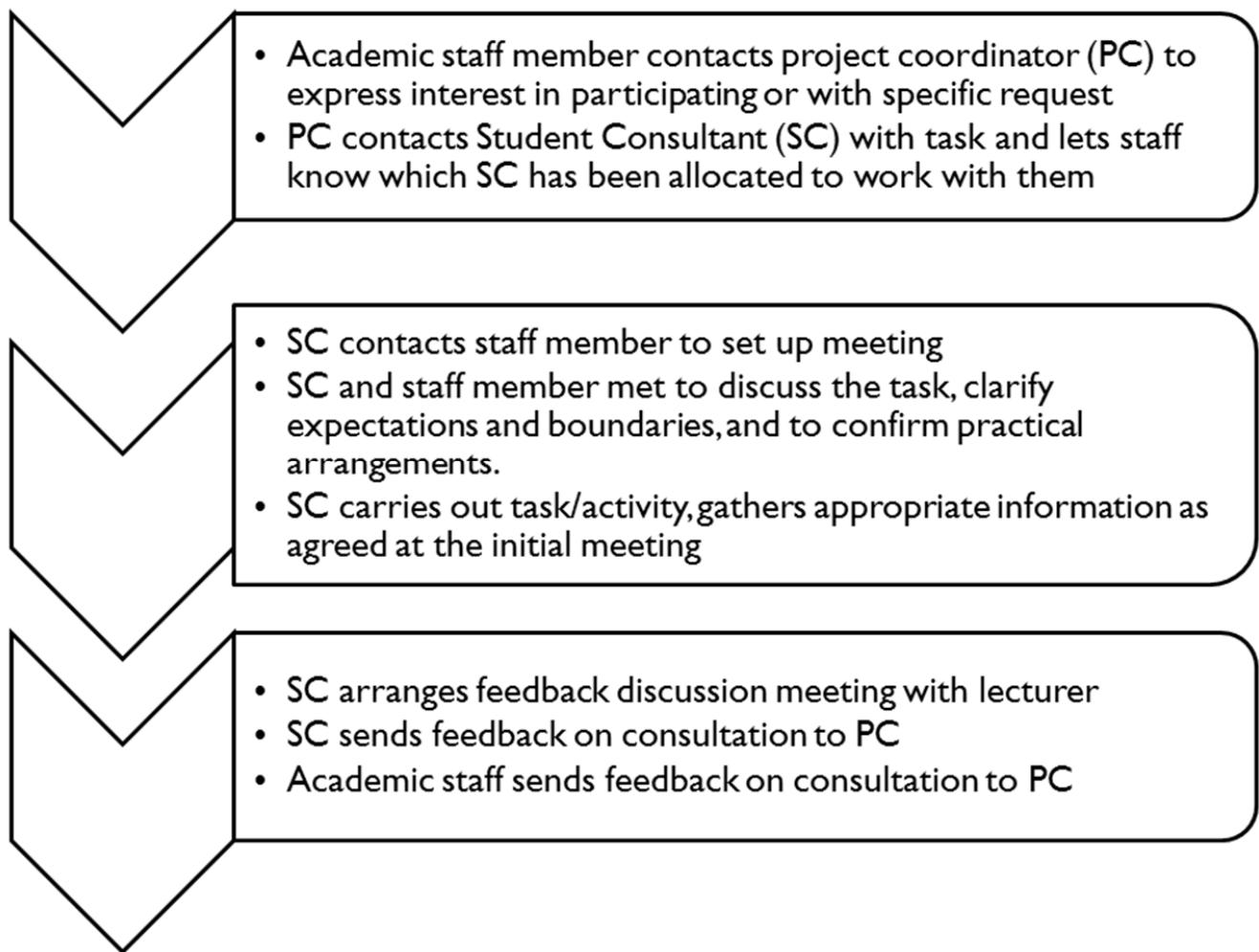
Academic staff at the case study institution were contacted via the newsletter of the teaching and learning development centre. A total of thirteen lecturers came forward in the first year of the project wanting feedback on a range of aspects of their teaching. All of them asked for some form of observation of session/activity often combined with a focus group or dialogue with students. Some of the more specific requests included:

- getting a student perspective on the structure of course materials on the virtual learning environment
- gaining student views on a redesigned teaching programme using a pedagogical model based on case studies and guest lecturers
- Supporting the evaluation implementing a 'flipped classroom' approach.

The project coordinator assigned a Student Consultant to work with the lecturer based upon the student's availability and details of the staff request, whilst ensuring that the student had no previous, current or planned future connections with that member of staff. Participation for members of staff was voluntary and

students were paid an hourly rate of £10.35. The process is outlined in Figure 2 below:

Figure 2: The consultation process



Following this both the student and the member of staff were contacted by the project coordinator about the process and asked to fill in a short evaluation form.

Developing student confidence through training activities

There were some skills that we wanted to ensure all student consultants developed and concepts that they were introduced to so that we were assured of their ability to do the work. We organised two half day training

sessions with the aims of developing students':

- ability to lead the consultation process (time management, negotiating the type of consultation, knowing boundaries of the consultation, ethical issues such as confidentiality);
- confidence in the value of their perspective as an 'authentic' student opinion; and
- skills in providing constructive feedback to lecturers about their professional practice.

The overarching aim of the training was to prepare the student to take a lead in running the consultation process with staff and develop confidence in their role and the perspective they could offer. The training also developed students' confidence in their 'authentic' student voice, in the sense that they were able to offer their perspectives based on their own experiences of being a student. As Crawford notes, 'students have unique perspectives and are experts on the experience of learning in higher education' (Crawford, 2012, p. 60). The training activities put emphasis on the students as partners offering perspectives as part of a dialogue focused on discussion and reflecting on teaching and learning practice rather than working as 'problem solvers' offering solutions. We wanted the students to feel confident in using their experiences and perspectives as learners to evaluate what they were asked to take on, identify issues and to lead the conversations in which they fed back to lecturers. Whilst we recognised that many students might already be described and describe themselves as confident and experienced, our concern was that lecturers are imbued with role status and power. Therefore the training needed to empower the Student Consultants to be able to move beyond these roles of student/lecturer and to be able to operate more as equals in which the students understood that they offered a unique perspective that could contribute to a meaningful dialogue.

The training also focused on how to give feedback in a way that enabled conversations about teaching and learning rather than judgments about approaches. One particular training activity was a micro lecture activity where students had to deliver a five minute talk and this was used as an exercise to develop empathy with the lecturers and to support successful ways of framing feedback. The students were encouraged to use

some principles for good feedback including being descriptive rather than judgemental, being specific rather than general, being constructively framed and hence useable.

A guest lecture was given by a member of staff who included both elements of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ practice. For instance, as examples of poor teaching practice, the lecturer delivered some parts of the session speaking entirely to the overhead projector and also included far too many slides for the time allocated. She also demonstrated a range of questioning techniques and group work activities. Following this, the students offered feedback to the guest lecturer applying the principles from their training.

Developing partnerships

We paired Student Consultants with academic staff from outside their discipline context, in order to help to reduce some aspects of the power dynamic between staff and students. We wanted students not to be in the same academic department or faculty to avoid any conflict of interest so that students were not paired with any member of staff responsible for teaching or assessing their work.

This decision was something that we reviewed during the evaluation process and no academic member of staff raised the fact that the student was from a different discipline as an issue. It appears from some staff comments and feedback from student consultants that staff valued having someone from outside the discipline context to bring a fresh perspective to their teaching:

It was great to have an ‘impartial’ observer who was a student and not a member of ...staff. (Academic staff member K)

The opportunity to engage a student perspective is refreshing and challenging. I think this is valuable. (Academic staff member G)

Likewise the students did not report any concerns with working outside their discipline.

In the initial request phase of the process, most staff did not present a clear idea about what they wanted the student consultant to work with them on, so often, the student consultant activity was negotiated in the initial meeting between the student and the member of staff. A number of the students commented on how much freedom they were given in the consultations in terms of what they could discuss or comment on:

...with the course reps the lecturers know your role but in this...they don't and they allow me to speak more and do more (Student Consultant E)

We believe that this 'freedom' came about because 'Student Consultant' was a new role and staff were unsure what to expect from the students, as opposed to their own students or a course rep.

Consultations as liminal space

The consultation process was designed to enable conversations and reflections on teaching and learning with the Student Consultants contributing their unique student perspective as 'experts on the experience of learning in higher education' (Crawford, 2012, p. 60). It aimed to be a way for academic staff and students to step outside of their traditional roles and the traditional hierarchical power relationship. This kind of partnership approach is described by Cook-Sather as a way to '...recognize students as differently positioned knowers with insights to share as partners in exploration but not ultimate authorities' and leads to '...reunderstanding teaching and learning as more collaborative processes' (Cook-Sather 2013, p. 6).

Through evaluating the project we have come to understand the consultancy activity as taking place in a space beyond the ones that normally exists for staff and students to interact within. We have found the concept of liminality useful in thinking about this space to develop our understanding of the relationships and the experiences that students and staff were describing in their feedback.

The term 'liminality' originates in the field of anthropology where it was first used by Arnold van Gennep in relation to ritual practices involving a transitional period when moving from one state to another

(Turner, 1982; Thomassen, 2009), for example in rituals connected to adolescence where one transitions from girlhood to womanhood. The term was taken up by Victor Turner in the 1960s and has come to connote qualities of ambiguity and to be applied in a wider sense beyond ritual practices (Thomassen, 2009; Szakolczai, 2009, p.142). It is characterised by some dissolving of sense of identity as the liminal persona falls outside a category but also the possibility of novel ideas and relations (Cook-Sather & Alter, 2011; Thomassen, 2009; Turner, 1982).

Cook-Sather and Alter (2011) make use of Turner's work and the term 'liminal' to describe the blurring of roles that results when undergraduates work as pedagogical consultants where they are in-between being a student or being a teacher:

...we are interested in exploring liminality as a threshold between and among clearly established roles at which one can linger, from which one can depart and to which one can return...what happens when undergraduate students take up a liminal position between student and teacher...with the goal of accessing and acting upon the insights that such an indeterminate state affords... (Cook-Sather and Alter, 2011, p. 38).

Drawing on Cook-Sather and Alter's discussion we suggest that because the student and staff consultations are outside their normal roles it can be a way for students to bring their experiences to inform a staff perspective. This offers insights for staff on the way students experience their academic practice as well as a way for students to achieve insights into the perspectives of the member of staff. In this way the consultations create the conditions for a liminal space outside of traditional roles of student and lecturer where new ways of relating to each other can be negotiated and thus where the conversations can be used to explore topics outside of some of the constraints of the traditional student-lecturer power dynamic.

Reflections: a new student role and a new relationship with staff

The claim that the partnership model enabled a different student-staff relationship is further supported by data

from the project evaluation when the Student Consultants compared the role of being a course representative (course rep or ‘repping’) to being a Consultant. The students concluded that in the role of Consultant they felt equal to the lecturer they were working with and the nature of the scheme meant they were welcomed or invited in:

...with student repping people can be quite defensive whereas in this environment, the person is directly asking for feedback. (Student Consultant F)

...not as lecturer and student it was ‘I am here to help you and you are here to help me’, finding things out together and it was really good... (Student Consultant K)

...people dread seeing you as a student rep whereas this way they look forward to seeing you. It’s a case of: ‘oh, what is the feedback’... (Student Consultant I)

This feedback highlights the sense of mutuality and collaboration with which student and staff approached working together. We argue that this supports the idea of the Student Consultant model having the potential to develop a liminal space or position where their role is less defined as ‘student’ or ‘learner’ and they are able to engage with staff in different ways and staff have less defined expectations of them.

Reflections: developing new perspectives, confidence and skills

In a survey sent to the eleven students asking them to evaluate their experiences of participating, eight students responded and their responses indicate they have developed their views on what it means to teach and how complex learning is. We asked them to what extent the project had changed or informed their perception of teaching and learning:

I am definitely more informed about the underlying principles of good teaching and how people learn. I have always been aware of people learning better in different forms but I have been able to see where they fit into different subject areas and content types. (Student – anonymous survey response)

Teaching is far more complex than I ever thought, and even though some teachers do understand that changes are necessary and even implement them it is very difficult to get students interested, involved and inspired. (Student – anonymous survey response)

We also asked the students about the skills or benefits that they thought they had gained by being part of this project. One student said:

I feel that I have certainly gained more skills and experience in the way I think and give critique. This has helped me in my everyday studies giving me more confidence in my own feedback. (Student Consultant H)

Whilst other students mentioned confidence in giving feedback, ability to communicate effectively, seeing teaching methods more clearly and more observant of good practices since doing training and observing others.

These comments show that the project has supported the majority of students to gain confidence, communication skills and a wider perspective on teaching and learning as a result of working as Student Consultants. This finding is coherent with Cook-Sather's research supporting students to work as pedagogical consultants with faculty members. As Cook-Sather reports, students gain 'a more informed critical perspective within and beyond classrooms...and building greater confidence, capacity, and agency as learners and people' (Cook-Sather, 2011, p. 43).

Reflections: a positive experience for staff

Twelve out of thirteen staff responded to the evaluation survey and all said they would recommend working with a Student Consultant to their colleagues and that the Student Consultants were professional in the manner they carried out the meetings and the tasks. The partnership model with a collaborative ethos promoted by the project team seems to have been successful in engaging staff and enabling dialogue about teaching and learning in an informal and constructive way:

Working with the student consultants was a real delight; they were professional and polite throughout. They also provided some really useful feedback in a very objective and non-judgemental way; nowhere near as scary as one might first imagine! (Academic member of staff I)

It was good to be able to speak in a relaxed and informal way about the delivery of the course. (Academic staff member F)

The Student Consultants were equally pleasantly surprised by the collaboration, how they were viewed by staff and the insight they gained into a staff perspective:

I was initially concerned...that I would not be taken seriously...however the staff that I have worked with have had respect for the project and have been eager to find ways of improving the learning experience for their students. (Student Consultant F)

As the comment suggests, Student Consultant F was actively and meaningfully involved in an informal process to improve the learning experience and develop teaching and learning practice. We argue that these kinds of comments show how the Student Consultant partnership model can be a way to bring students into quality enhancement processes in a meaningful way. As Dunne and Zandstra (2011) highlight, this is also a way for students to adopt an active role as 'change agents' rather than the more passive role that the idea of 'listening to student voice' implies. Academic developers interested in embedding student perspectives in professional development activities focused on any aspect of teaching and learning could use the model to benefit from the resulting mutual understanding.

Impact on teaching and learning

The twelve staff who responded to the evaluation survey all had positive things to say about the feedback and comments they received from the Student Consultants. Some of the members of staff commented specifically on the benefit of seeing the student perspective:

I thought it was amazing. We looked at what students wanted from feedback as opposed to what I want them to learn. (Academic staff member H)

I thought the feedback was incredibly useful. It had both positive and negative points and he had clearly thought about the activity and its use to students. (Academic member of staff J)

Further comments focused on other ways the feedback from students were useful in terms of reassuring staff about their approaches as well as the way the Student Consultants had organised the feedback process

I found the observation response useful and reassuring. (Academic staff member O)

The feedback received provided some very useful insights. The feedback was delivered in written and verbal form, written first followed by a face-to-face meeting. This was very useful, since it allowed time for reflection on various aspects of the consultation before being given further comments and being able to ask for clarification on a couple of points. (Academic member of staff I)

Very useful, thoughtful and balanced. (Academic member of staff G)

It was clear from the responses and the student reflections on the consultancy activities that a face to face follow up meeting with staff produced the best discussion and impact. Not all staff requested this, some just wanted written feedback. In these instances, there was no opportunity for the Student Consultant to discuss the feedback. We consider that this was a weakness in the project because it failed to open up dialogue and made it more difficult to determine whether the Consultant had had an impact. Hence for the future operation of the project we are giving stronger guidance to the Consultants on the importance of discussing feedback through face to face mechanisms.

The selection of comments illustrates the different levels of engagement with the Student Consultants, from the ‘it is a useful perspective’ to ‘amazing alternative perspective’ that can be tentatively characterised as a scale of engagement and collaboration that exists within the partnership model. At the most engaged and transformative end of this scale, academic staff used the consultation process to develop their understanding

of the students' perspectives and used this to inform their academic practice. Here we can see the potential for meaningful engagement with students and collaboration that is a characteristic of working in partnership. In this transformed interaction students' perspectives are valued, respected and actively sought in order to discuss and develop shared understandings of teaching and learning approaches, activities and processes. However, at the least transformed end of the scale, the consultations were used as a checking mechanism to reinforce their opinion of the teaching and learning process rather than to interrogate and develop a new understanding derived from the Student Consultant's unique perspectives.

Although the partnership model developed in this project did not necessarily lead to full engagement and transformation in all of the student-staff collaborations, we argue that it provides very powerful possibilities for staff to reflect on and develop their teaching and learning approaches and active and meaningful ways for students to engage in this process. As such the model is an example of student and staff taking shared responsibility for the development of practices aimed at enhancing the students' learning, which is the definition of student engagement outlined by Robinson (2012). The students are actively involved in the process actually working with staff rather than simply offering survey feedback etc. We suggest that key to enabling this shared responsibility is the way the Student Consultant model offered a 'liminal' space where the relationship of student and staff can be a more equal and collaborative one.

The project has other limitations which we are aiming to address as the project develops. First, the project is limited in scope because of the number of students that can work as Student Consultants and appeals principally to academic staff who are already engaged in reflecting and developing their practice. Second, although the project did not specifically encourage consultations focused on lectures, this was the main practice that both students and staff focused on. We are also working to develop ways to track impact over time.

Conclusion

The paper has described and analysed a model for developing student-staff partnerships to enhance teaching and learning in a higher education context; a model that positioned and enabled students to act as Consultants providing timely and focused feedback to academic staff on aspects of their practice. Training for the students was designed to give them confidence in using their experiences as learners to offer unique perspectives as part of a meaningful dialogue with staff about teaching and learning. As a result of working as Consultants most of the students said they gained confidence, improved their communication skills and developed their awareness of teaching and learning approaches.

The most successful student-staff partnerships that came about from the consultation process created space for conversation and collaboration, a liminal space where students and staff stepped outside normal roles and the traditional learner-teacher relationship. In this liminal space, and acting in a new - not quite defined role - as Student Consultants, the students reported that they felt equal to the academic staff they were working with. Because the liminal space (and state) is characterised by ambiguity this can be useful when you want to work outside traditional constraints but it is also a vulnerable state as you are in between recognised roles and this can be an uncomfortable experience. It is clear that academic staff were not sure what to expect from students in their Student Consultant role and this was somewhat unsettling for them, however, the feedback on working with the Student Consultants was all positive. We argue that creating such liminal spaces where students and staff can come together outside their normal roles can be a powerful tool to develop partnerships that can drive educational development. We also suggest that our findings from this small scale research study indicate that working across disciplines can possibly strengthen a focus on teaching and learning.

At the most transformative, this model enables academic staff to get a sense of the learner perspectives and to view students as partners and collaborators while students develop insights into the perspectives of

staff. And it is this acknowledgement of different positions in the teaching and learning experience that can lead to developing both their understandings of teaching and learning.

We suggest that the project represents a model of an innovative approach to engaging students in a meaningful way in enhancing teaching and learning and has the potential to reframe the student-teacher relationship into a more collaborative one. It is a partnership model that goes beyond listening to students and offers them a central role in developing teaching and learning.

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