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Abstract

Debates in higher education problematise the role of students in student engagement.

Resisting neoliberal values and language, scholars argue that students should be positioned as '*partners*' or '*change agents*' rather than '*customers*' or '*consumers*,' but the extent to which students are able to self-author their experiences as subjects rather than objects in mainstream publications is rare. Drawing on standpoint theory, we—three students from international contexts—argue that if students are to shape higher education discourses, then students' work needs to be more prominently represented in mainstream academic publishing. We exemplify one approach to alternate forms of conducting and sharing student-led research by exploring and representing our own experiences of gender in partnership through poetic transcription. In doing so, we hope to disrupt some of the dominant assumptions around the positioning of students as objects in research and the validity of students' self-authored voices in higher education.

Keywords: student-staff partnership, student experience, student engagement, gender, poetic transcription, standpoint theory

Word count: 2,799 (not including reference list)

Workshopping Partnership

I am a strong, powerful woman
confident in my abilities –
entitled to my voice

I attended a workshop on partnership:
a group of three
me (an undergraduate student)
a female faculty member
a male senior administrator

Interrupting a conversation I wasn't
invited to
 trying to
 insert my thoughts
 a (minorly) disruptive decision
his back actively turned to me
I really had to shove them in

they nodded / superficially expressed interest

A strong, powerful woman?
[a slight smirk]
'You know how *they* are.'

a token student – all that self-belief out the window

it felt like a defeat:
I became the notetaker.

He thanked me for being part of the group.

In a relationship like that

dominating gendered behaviours
drowning out the voices of others

me,

at the bottom.

Forced to conform to the heteronormative stereotype

don't step forward

fearful of speaking

guilty that I didn't

toxic feminist

sometimes I feel like it's easier just to let it play out?

If I stayed quiet, not contributing, nobody would care

my subtle indicators of discomfort, fear

She went out of her way,

considerate,

encouraging:

take the reins.

We know about each other,

share something between us –

our partnership: nourishing.

She does not impose her authority.

A shift in power

a pleasure to learn.

I felt liberated

capable

in a relationship like that.

womanhood in three parts

i.

i was not allowed to have a voice

(be seen and not heard)

i was not really invited

(don't rock the boat)

i was not sure if they actually cared

(play nice)

men needing (to be in) control and power

(i'm tired)

me at the bottom of the hierarchy:

it's easier to just let it play out.

ii.

I was not afraid of looking stupid.

I am entitled to assert my own voice.

(interrupted him –

explained assertively)

A lack of enforced power dynamics made it easier.

The three women had coffee,

One cried – sharing her similar experience.

We bonded over anger at injustice.

(we support each other)

iii.

Partnership is an act

of risk-taking and vulnerability.

Not just taking the assertion

of [*male*] dominance.

The atmosphere:

respect, equity, and reciprocity in the room.

A (*rare*) valuable space

INTERSECTIONS

[I] was the (only) student. [N]ot listened to, I was [T]ired of always being expected to be in the accommodating, unexciting roles. He was [E]ntirely deferential to the other man. After [R]ealizing my partnership identity there was a sense of *comradery*. There is something [S]pecial about partnership with women who [E]mpower and support you to be your best. A [C]ollaborator: she was wearing a shirt that said “Feminist.” [T]hose strong, powerful women made it a pleasure to do the work and learn; [I] was not afraid of failure. I have [O]nly experienced that kind of generous encouragement and careful attention to power in my professional relationships with women. [N]othing is like it. [S]he: always ready to uplift.

Emotional Labour

i left the meeting feeling dismayed
i felt there was a power hierarchy going on
i felt i had to impress these people
i felt being viewed as a student contributed to my power being taken away
i felt gender played a role
i felt tired.

in an ideal situation, i would have felt comfortable discussing my feelings but
i didn't feel heard
i didn't feel like they were creating space
i didn't feel they were committed to partnership
i didn't feel trust.

i feel mildly annoyed
that being a woman means i am attuned to emotions and feelings
we try to be accommodating and helpful
we pay careful attention to emotions and power dynamics
we are conditioned to care.

it would be a relief
to be in a relational space
where we are not perpetually excluded
where we are not made to fight harder than our male peers for recognition
where we can be leaders
where we feel safe.

I believe all these things exist because
This is how I feel in my many nourishing partnerships
I feel lucky
I feel strong
I feel *liberated*
from my emotional labour.

Have you ever been to an art gallery where the pieces are presented alone, without descriptions written by curators or artists? It is a vastly different experience from the regular approach to presenting art where people most often look to the description, read (at length) what they are told is shown in the art, and then look (more briefly) at the piece itself. This precludes a space to engage with the piece on an individual level—leaves less open to interpretation. In sharing our ‘results’ with you before anything else, like those galleries that eschew instructive descriptions, we wanted to give you the space to engage with our words without the usual effort to ‘forcefully’ direct your gaze. This is an experience we aimed to replicate in sharing our results upfront, in the form of poetic transcription.

How did this reading experience feel for you? Was it uncomfortable? Did you yearn for something more traditional, more familiar, for an hourglass structure? Was it liberating to engage with data in a different way? What questions did this evoke for you? What assumptions do those questions reveal? These were all emotions and questions we faced in the writing of this piece. Did you want to know more—about the rationale, the methods, the analysis? Don’t worry, we won’t deprive you of those.

The poetic transcriptions above are compiled entirely from text drawn from autoethnographic reflective narratives on our experiences of gender in student-staff partnership in higher education. Given the importance of ‘our’ in this context (as both authors and subjects of the research), we feel that it is important to get to know us a bit better before moving on. We are three white, cis-gendered, female students—one from Australia (postgraduate) and two from Canada (postgraduate and undergraduate). We have shared our experiences separately and together of working in student-staff partnership. These, as with all, experiences were inherently gendered and it was therefore through this lens that we chose to explore our partnerships more deeply. We chose to conduct and share this exploration in ways that counter the normative expectations for publishing because we believe, as we

expand upon below, that student's self-authored voices lend themselves to alternate (but no less legitimate) ways of knowing, researching, and writing. This is our take on sharing those alternatives.

Research Rationale

Current debates in the higher education sector have begun to question the role of students in student engagement. Traditionally, the dominant hierarchies dictated that student engagement is something done *to* students rather than something done *with* students (Matthews 2016). In recent decades, however, there has been pushback against these narratives, particularly as researchers problematise the positioning of students as '*consumers*' in neoliberal university contexts (Bryson 2016, Kay, Dunne, and Hutchinson 2010). Arguments have been made that students should be seen as '*partners*' or '*change agents*' with shared responsibility for, and active engagement in, their learning experiences (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014, Dunne and Zandstra 2011).

Authorship trends in the 'students as partners' ('partnership') literature, however, suggest some residue of the colonialist mindset that positions students as objects in teaching and learning endeavours, despite this greater focus on student engagement. Recent research indicates that, of an analysed set of articles on students as partners, 89% had a staff first author and 99% included a staff co-author, with only a third including a student co-author—indicating a relative scarcity of student-led or solely student-authored articles in this space (Mercer-Mapstone et al. 2017). Mercer-Mapstone and colleagues problematise these findings by arguing that the lack of reciprocity in partnership authorship limits the role of students and the extent to which students can authentically shape the field itself. We problematise this further, arguing that not only should students have authentic opportunities to shape

partnership scholarship, but they may actually be best positioned to do so, given the authority that comes from their situated knowledges *as students*.

A student standpoint

We base our arguments on standpoint theory as a useful lens through which to critically examine and question issues related to power, voice, and authority. Standpoint theory places intrinsic value on individual ways of knowing, arguing that the integration of the experiences of silenced or oppressed groups into normative discourses is critical in painting fuller views of the world (Harding 2004). Politically contentious, standpoint theory encapsulates ‘the thesis that those who are marginalized or oppressed under conditions of systemic inequity may, in fact, be better knowers, in a number of respects, than those who are socially or economically privileged’ (Wylie 2012, 47).

There is power in the authority of situated expertise. bell hooks (1989) argues that the notion of authority on certain issues may best (or only) be attached to those who speak unambiguously from certain positions in society. For example, hooks makes the argument that Black women’s voices should be given authority when it comes to describing or researching Black women’s experiences. We suggest here that students, whose voices have primarily been silenced in historic higher education hegemonies, should hold positions of authority on their own experiences. This is particularly relevant in light of recent debates around students’ roles in student engagement and specifically in the context of partnership where one of the primary aims is to provide space for students’ self-empowerment and agency (Abbot 2017, Dunne and Zandstra 2011). The broader sharing of students’ self-authored work from individual, situated experiences is also critical if our aim is to avoid presenting students as a single homogenous group, which risks stereotyping or marginalising the diverse realities of student cohorts. Cook-Sather (2007) advocated the need for individual

students' voices to be heard to represent the full complexity of 'student identity' so as to avoid being 'impositional' when engaging in partnership scholarship.

Students' self-authorship

Publications on partnership solely authored by students are increasing (e.g., Dwyer 2018, Mathrani 2018, Wynkoop 2018) but continue to be published in smaller, engagement-focussed journals and in genres other than research articles. We thus reiterate the question posed by Mercer-Mapstone et al. (2017, 14-15): 'Are there new ways of thinking and new genres of writing that can transform how [partnership] research is conducted and reported that would encourage the extension of partnership through to publication?' Furthermore, we ask: Where are the spaces for such publications in broader higher education journals that may facilitate, as Flint (2016, 1) puts it, students' knowledge and expertise moving from the 'fringe to the mainstream'?

Much of the exemplary work sole-authored by students focuses on reflection—exploring, understanding, analysing, and sharing accounts of their experiences either individually or collectively. Such reflections, however, run the risk of being discounted as 'less rigorous' than traditional ways of collecting and publishing knowledge in academia (O'Meara 2005). We argue here that reflective or other alternative approaches to researching and sharing partnership, particularly where students author their own experiences (rather than being objects of research), may be some of the most appropriate genres through which to share student engagement work. Not only is reflection potentially more accessible for students, but through the lens of standpoint theory, these first-hand accounts are powerful because they emerge from a position of authority rooted in experience and contribute to depicting a complex multi-faceted view of the field (Harding 2004). In addition, given the primacy of relationships and emotions to partnership work (Felten 2017, Mathrani 2018,

Hermesen et al. 2017), alternate research approaches and publication genres are arguably more appropriate in capturing and sharing the ‘messiness’ of partnership.

Therefore, as three students who regularly engage in student-staff partnerships situated in university contexts across two different countries and institutions, we saw personal and broader value in exploring our experiences of partnership across differing socio-cultural contexts. We followed the lead of other partnership practitioners in embracing reflection as our methodological choice (e.g., Seale et al. 2015). As women, we shared many gendered experiences and since this is a space that has undergone little research in the context of partnership in higher education, we chose to focus our reflections on our experiences of gender in partnership. In the process of analysing our data, we also concluded that normative ways of reporting our results limited the extent to which we could share the intricacy of our reflections. We therefore chose to share our findings through poetic transcription—the results of which you have already seen—and a description of which, and argument for, is shared below. In these multiple, small ways we hope to disrupt some of the dominant assumptions around the positioning of students as objects in research and the validity of students’ self-authored voices in higher education research.

Methods

We drew on the methods employed by Mercer-Mapstone, Marquis, and McConnell (2018) to use collaborative autoethnography to explore our experiences of gender in partnership.

Autoethnography situates the researcher as the participant and focus of the research (Reed-Danahay 1997). Collaborative autoethnography replicates this self-study in a collaborative process that involves multiple researchers as participants. Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez (2013, 17) argue the value for collaborative autoethnography, describing it as: ‘a group of researchers pooling their stories to find some commonalities and differences ... to discover

the meanings of the stories in relation to their socio-cultural contexts.’ The method of self-study we have chosen is that of guided reflective narrative—a method of data collection typical of both autoethnography and the exploration of partnership in higher education (Becker et al. 2015, Seale et al. 2015).

Guided reflective narratives

The process of reflection is inherently experiential and is, therefore, an appropriate approach for developing a deeper understanding of the situated experiences of small groups of people (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, Clandinin 1995). To ensure a robust reflection process, our individual reflections were guided by the same reflective framework adapted from previous resources and research (Mercer-Mapstone, Marquis, and McConnell 2018, University of Brighton 2011). A series of questions prompted us to move through stages of description, reflection, analysis, learning and action. Each of us wrote two individual reflections. The first reflection asked us each to focus on two experiences of partnership where we perceived our gender identity to be salient: one positive and one negative. Each reflection was approximately 1,500 words, resulting in a dataset of 9,000 words.

Analysis

We used thematic analysis to analyse the dataset, employing the Braun and Clarke (2006) six-phase approach: data familiarisation, initial codes, theme identification, theme review, theme definition and naming, and report assembly. However, when it came to compiling our results in the traditional manner (descriptive text with illustrative quotes), we felt there was a certain disjunct between our reflections and what we reported—as if a level of depth, nuance, and emotion had been erased by the method itself. It is these three aspects of partnership—depth, nuance, and emotion—that make its practice so unique in higher education. Hence the

necessity to search and develop alternate ways to report our results. Inspired by the works of Lenihan-Ikin et al. (under review) and Flint (under review), who each have broached the sharing of partnership through poetry, we decided upon poetic transcription.

Glesne (1997, 202) describes poetic transcription as the ‘creation of poem-like compositions from the words of interviewees.’ This form of re-presenting results makes room for ‘the shapes of inter-subjectivity, and examining issues of power and authority ... inclusive of emotional reactions as well as analytical descriptions’ (Glesne 1997, 204). We argue that, given the nature of partnership as a way to critically examine power and embrace the emotional aspects of our practices, this approach felt appropriate for presenting our reflective data. Poetic transcription has been used in similarly reflective higher education contexts, including exploring teaching approaches (Jones 2010) and in professional development (Smart and Loads 2017).

We followed the guide described by Glesne to undertake our poetic transcriptions, namely: all the words in the poetic transcripts would be drawn from our reflective data; words and phrases did not have to remain in chronological order so could be juxtaposed from different sections of the transcripts; and to make sense in relation to other passages, tense or word endings could be changed. The process of poetic transcription involves processes akin to thematic analysis and the poetic transcripts we shared above reflect the primary themes and subthemes that resulted from our initial analysis.

Conclusion Opening

‘Conclusions suggests an ending, a linear progression that can be resolved in some neat way. I see no conclusions here, but rather *openings*’ (Glesne, 1997, 218). We agree with this sentiment and therefore resist presenting a typical academic discussion of our data that dissects and lays bare what it is we want you to see. We stated earlier that the epistemological

and methodological choices we made in the creation of this article were designed to disrupt some of the dominant assumptions around the positioning of students and the validity of our/their self-authored voices. We invite you to join us in this disruption. Look, read, engage, interpret, and disrupt as you will.

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