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Conceptions of students as partners

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Abstract Engaging *students as partners* (SaP) in teaching and learning is an emerging yet contested topic in higher education. This study interviewed 16 students and staff working in partnership across 11 Australian universities to understand how they conceptualised SaP and the opportunities they believed SaP afforded their universities. Thematic analysis revealed three overlapping conceptions of partnership: *SaP as counter-narrative*, *SaP as values-based practice*, and *SaP as cultural change*. The findings are first interpreted through the lens of liminality and an ethic of care. This is followed by a discussion of inclusivity of involvement, resistance, and reinforcement of neoliberal agendas despite good intentions. Finally, implications for cautious enactment of both practice and research are offered.

Keywords Students as partners · Higher education · Reciprocity · Neoliberal · Liminality · Ethic of care

Introduction

Students as partners (SaP) is fundamentally about meaningful relationships between students and staff members at a university. Cook-Sather et al. (2014) see partnership as 'a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision-making, implementation, investigation, or analysis' (p. 6–7). This view of partnership recognises that students and staff possess different but comparable forms of expertise. Healey et al. (2014) suggest that partnership teams may work to enhance teaching, learning, and assessment; design curricula and evaluate pedagogy; engage in subject-based research; or participate in the scholarship of teaching and learning. Matthews et al. (2018) argue for partnership in the context of developing broader institutional cultures that value egalitarian

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learning communities comprising both students and staff. Scholars have positioned SaP as a relational approach to student engagement that emphasises shared responsibility for learning and teaching through a process of mutual engagement between students and staff (Cook-Sather et al. 2014; Healey et al. 2014; Matthews 2016a).

SaP is a process of renegotiating traditional positions, power arrangements, and ways of working in higher education. After engaging in partnership, teachers reconceptualise their pedagogy as an interaction, rather than a process of transmission, and argue they work with students as colleagues, not subjects (Cook-Sather 2014). Through partnership, students reconceptualise themselves and staff members as both teachers and students (Cook-Sather and Luz 2015). A reported benefit of SaP in the literature is a transformed sense of self and self-awareness for both students and staff (Bovill et al. 2011; Cook-Sather and Abbot 2016). Other benefits include an increased sense of responsibility for, and motivation in, the learning process for students and staff (Bovill et al. 2010), positive learning impacts for students, and shifts in the culture of institutions towards collaboration (Cook-Sather et al. 2014).

There are challenges to partnership reported in the literature (Bovill et al. 2016). Despite these challenges, SaP has gained significant attention in academia and universities with established journals publishing special issues on the topic (e.g., *International Journal for Academic Development, 21,* 1), a new journal dedicated solely to SaP (*International Journal of Students as Partners*) that operates through partnership (Cliffe et al. 2017), a practitioner journal of reflective essays (*Teaching & Learning Together in Higher Education*), and an international institute on the topic (Marquis et al. 2017).

Student-staff partnership is now emerging in practice and research in Australia (Bell 2016). SaP was the guiding topic for the federally funded 2016 Transforming Practices Program (TPP), from which this study's participants were drawn (Matthews 2016b). This program was modelled after the UK Change Academy, which focused on students as partners in 2012–2013 (Higher Education Academy 2014). There is an emerging literature on SaP in the Australian context which is predominantly practice-focused, analysing case studies to emphasise the benefits of SaP for students (Sandover et al. 2012), reflective essays on SaP in practice from the perspective of students and staff (Matthews 2017a), the effect of this work on students' understanding of higher education (Peseta et al. 2016), and exploration of SaP in relation to notions of student engagement (Matthews 2016a). Along with the documented interest, practice, and advocacy for SaP in Australia, insight into how practitioners conceptualise the growing practice of partnership would contribute to both research and practice.

The aim of this research is to explore the conceptions of Australian university students and staff working in partnership. It is underpinned by two questions: *how do students and staff conceptualise SaP?* And *what opportunities do they believe SaP will afford their universities?* Our study furthers the scope of Australian practice and research by analysing the views of students and staff engaged in SaP projects across 11 Australian universities while contributing a richer depth of research within the broader discourse of SaP in higher education.

Methods

This is a qualitative exploratory study, conducted in accordance with ethical standards following Institutional Human Research Ethics Approval (#2015001638). As qualitative researchers, we see teaching and learning as socially constructed in that individual perspectives differ depending on experiences and worldviews (Merriam 2009). Qualitative research is grounded

in participants' perspectives and how they make meaning of experiences and is beneficial for exploratory studies as it allows the researcher to explore complex issues and to develop theory (Creswell 2012). This method allows flexible and open insight into complex and relatively unknown topics (Kember and Ginns 2012). Given the nature of this heuristic exploratory study, we are not attempting to represent groups of people, but rather present differing perspectives, not necessarily shared by all individuals, to highlight the range of conceptions about SaP.

Context

This work explores the implementation of the Australian TPP. In 2016, the TPP theme was *Student Engagement: Students as Partners*. Teams comprising staff and at least one student from 11 Australian universities engaged in year-long projects to enhance processes, policies, strategies, and infrastructure for teaching and learning partnerships at their institutions. Each institutional team determined the scope and aims of their projects. Although projects differed, all fell within the broad theme of SaP while also being conducted in partnership (i.e., each team had at least one student member).

Data collection

Data for this study were collected through audio-recorded individual interviews with staff and students involved in the TPP. A paid student partner (co-author Turner) conducted interviews using a semi-structured interview guide with nine questions and one respondent-specific question (dependent on whether the interviewee was a student or staff). Participants were asked to reflect on their project and perceptions of SaP as a conceptual model and practical framework.

Participants

Individuals in the TPP were invited to participate in this study, with a total of 16 staff and students interviewed. Table 1 outlines participants' institutional roles and their sex. Participants were drawn from 11 Australian universities. Their institutions remain unnamed and pseudonyms have been assigned to maintain confidentiality.

Data analysis

Two paid student partners (co-authors Dwyer and Hine) analysed the interviews using NVivo 11 software, allowing for inter-coder consistency and reliability. To minimise selection bias, all

Table 1 Overview of interview participants

Participants	Female	Male	Total
Student	3	3	6
Staff (academic in central teaching and learning (T&L) unit*)	4	1	5
Staff (academic in discipline)	1	1	2
Student and staff (professional)**	3	–	3
Total	11	5	16

*Includes academic staff in central administrative roles (e.g., pro-vice chancellors in T&L)

**Staff members also enrolled as part-time students

transcript content was coded. The analytical framework utilised in this research was modelled on the process for thematic analysis in Braun and Clarke (2006), comprising six phases: familiarising yourself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. While initial coding focused on thematic analysis at the semantic level (where themes were derived from consistent response patterns), subsequent coding moved towards developing latent themes within the data (where themes were developed to map underlying assumptions and attitudes).

Results

Students and staff conceptualised SaP in three different, overlapping ways: *SaP as counter-narrative*, *SaP as values-based practice*, and *SaP as cultural change*. These final themes are displayed in Fig. 1, with sub-themes.

SaP as counter-narrative

Both students and staff positioned the ideals and practices of partnership within the changing nature of, and purpose for, higher education. Three ways of situating SaP as counter-narrative within the broader activity of university teaching and learning emerged: within a *traditional teacher-student model*, in relation to a recent but dominant *consumer model*, and as consistent with *a mutual learning model*.

In the traditional teacher-student model, interviewees described a hierarchical relationship between teachers with established expertise and students who are the recipients of knowledge. Central to this model is the authority of the teacher with unidirectional transmission of knowledge from teachers to students. Participants situated the consumer model within a neoliberal ethos that advocates the conceptualisation of universities as businesses, the commoditisation of education, and the abandonment of community in favour of individualistic self-interest in which students are perceived as consumers to be satisfied. In the mutual learning model, interviewees positioned students and staff as both learners and educators in a reciprocal relationship built upon respect, communication, and a balance of perspectives. SaP practice lies at the core of the mutual learning model and was viewed by practitioners as a powerful counter-narrative to the traditional teacher-student and consumer models.

We observed three distinct meta-processes taking place in regard to the models: the movement away from the traditional teacher-student model, the current dominance of the consumer model influencing policy and practice, and a dissonance between mutual learning within SaP and the neoliberal-oriented consumer model. For participants, SaP was a counter-narrative that challenged traditional and neoliberal views, creating space for relational narratives about learning, teaching, and higher education.
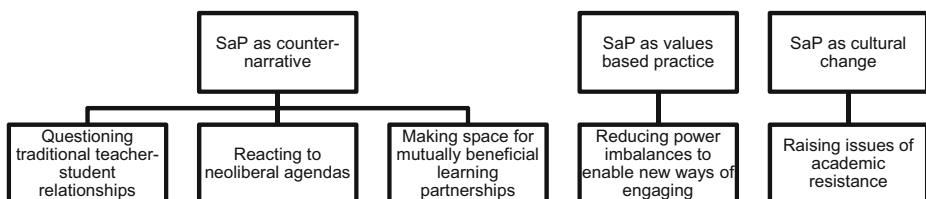
Fig. 1 Final themes and sub-themes

Questioning traditional teacher-student relationships Many participants felt their institutions were going through a transitional process, wherein there was a movement away from the traditional teacher-student model of higher education. Participants saw this model as rigid, hierarchical, and dismissive of student contributions and expertise about how teaching and learning should be conducted.

The prescribed roles of 'teacher' and 'student' were identified as problematic, restricting and predetermining how each group could contribute to teaching and learning processes and relate to each other in that process. Both staff and students felt that SaP operated as a counter-narrative to this model:

> I see [SaP] as an integrated approach to learning. A student has equal voice to an academic. There's no hierarchy… a student has the same rights to question an academic about their practice and teaching, just as an academic has the right to question a student on their work. (Dan, student, male)

While Dan framed this around equality between teachers and students, Yasmin saw SaP as a way of questioning the traditional teacher-student relationship within the wider context of change in higher education:

> So it's a new idea that's wanting to change the way the relationship between students and academics functions … Realising it's not a one-way where the lecturer gives information, but it's a really nice exchange between students and academics… it's encompassing the fact that universities are changing; it's a good change. (Yasmin, student and staff (professional), female)

Participants felt that SaP granted individuals the ability to operate beyond the confines of their predefined roles so they can relate to each other in new ways.

Reacting to neoliberal agendas The belief that universities embrace a consumer model that fosters transactional interactions between students and staff emerged. While students and staff both spoke to this issue, staff interviewees explained that the neoliberal approach framed universities as businesses, education as a product, and students as passive consumers. This was described as problematic because it reduced the teaching and learning experience to a transactional relationship, limited the capacity of students to take responsibility for their own learning, and undervalued or ignored collaborative student-staff partnerships. Nancy emphasises the passive identity of 'consumers':

> If you position yourself as a consumer, you defer responsibility… When you see yourself as a consumer … everything is someone else's fault. (Nancy, staff (academic in discipline), female)

SaP was seen as a counter-narrative to the consumer model, as it provided a shared and collaborative space where students and staff together could contribute to the planning and development of teaching and learning practices—sharing responsibility for those. Nicole notes within her group a shift in thinking from a neoliberal framework to one that aims to foster equitable and reciprocal relationships:

> Within the [project] group … there is more understanding of what it means to have students as partners in learning and teaching. I've seen that with the two associate deans

from the academic faculties … In the beginning … they're all advocates of students. But they were still thinking about using students as consumers … now they understand, when we say 'using students as partners'… it's about co-designers, co-developers, co-thinkers in a program. (Nicole, staff (academic in central T&L unit), female)

Making space for mutually beneficial learning partnerships SaP was grounded in a mutual learning model. Interviewees saw partnership as a way to create shared spaces for mutual growth, mutual learning, and relational modes wherein individuals could generate a shift in their identity and articulate themselves in new ways.

[Being a student partner] helped me recognise there isn't necessarily this hierarchy between academics and students. I haven't wanted to disagree with academics before, but this makes me feel safe to be able to say, well I do think this way or that way. So [SaP] does encourage that reciprocal honesty. (Yasmin, student and staff (professional), female)

Yasmin is describing the development of agency and a progression towards a new 'identity' formed through participation in partnership. She explained that by working with academic staff without the restrictions that would normally be imposed by traditional models of teaching and learning, she was able to comfortably speak with them at what she felt was a more equal level.

SaP is meant to be a partnership… I think a lot of it relies on the staff member trusting the student. It all comes down to communication, and the student trusting the staff member. (Darcy, student, female)

For Darcy, mutual trust was the foundation of partnership. Her involvement in SaP enabled Darcy to cultivate a sense of identity by improving her ability to trust and relate to staff. In this way, SaP can become a collaborative space wherein individuals work together, beyond the confines of their institutional roles.

SaP as values-based practice

The consistency among both staff and students in conceptualising values (e.g., trust, respect, openness, reciprocity) as fundamental to partnership suggests that SaP has an ideological basis within the mutual learning model. Central to reciprocity was a sense of shared respect, trust, and recognition of the expertise and unique perspectives that students and staff bring to partnership.

Anything that involves students to me is not SaP. It has to be underpinned by the intention to take seriously what they contribute… There's a balance in negotiation that needs to happen… I don't see SaP as being a place where you do what students want, but rather where you negotiate together. (Indira, staff (academic in central T&L unit), female)

Where partnership was formed and framed as reciprocal, all involved found the experience to be one of mutual learning that was both personally and institutionally valuable.

Currently, there isn't too much collaboration happening between students and lecturers… that's what SaP aims to do. Ideally, in the future, you'd want students and lecturers coming together to design assessments … hopefully that would boost student marks, student assessment, and have other benefits for the university. (Sam, student, male)

Relationships and individual identities are mutually informing and the values upon which relationships are established frame how people see themselves and each other.

Participants saw SaP as significant in its capacity to provide a core set of relational values that facilitate new ways of interacting and to dissolve boundaries that traditionally separate and define staff and student identities. Yasmin frames the reciprocal relationship that can occur in SaP as an exchange of equally valuable expertise:

> There is that idea of we're still learning, and we don't know it all. But it recognises academics also engage in that learning. They may start out with an idea, but they'll pick up things from their students… there's more of that exchange going on. (Yasmin, student and staff (professional), female)

Reducing power imbalances to enable new ways of engaging

> One of the most interesting things about partnership is power doesn't go away when you engage in partnership, but you need to be aware of it, engage it, and situate the work, the knowledge you have and how you engage… this will invite us to have a paradigm shift. (Edith, student and staff (professional), female)

SaP was perceived as a method through which students and staff could work towards reducing power imbalances to create more equal relationships. This change was achieved through collaboration and shared responsibility, which in turn reduced the saliency of traditional teacher and student roles. Nicole's vision was a move towards equal relationships at universities:

> I hope there will be more breaking down of walls between students, academic and professional staff. (Nicole, staff (academic in central T&L unit), female)

Some participants spoke of the struggle they faced in fully diminishing power dynamics. Sam discusses how this can be a give-and-take process where collaboration and communication are vital:

> Relinquishing power [is definitely a challenge of my university's SaP project]… You need collaboration … to have the project run smoothly. You can't just have students run everything … assessment would be really easy and you wouldn't learn anything. Then again, if you had the lecturers running the whole thing – as it has been previously – you get less student interest because they don't see the relevance in what they're doing. (Sam, student, male)

By putting into practice the values of SaP and using these to acknowledge and re-situate power, students and staff felt that they were able to form new types of relationships.

SaP as cultural change

Participants saw cultural change as essential and desirable within universities and emphasised that SaP played a key role in this. The current culture at their universities was generally described by participants as embedded within the traditional and neoliberal models of teaching

and learning practice, but many called for a shift away from this. Below, Dan indicates his desire for cultural change to improve his learning experience:

> We want to change that culture within the university towards a SaP model… [it] will make much more of a profound and better learning experience. (Dan, student, male)

Nancy went further to discuss how SaP could be integrated as a crucial part of the university culture:

> We want to integrate it in the performance management system of the university and put visible markers in the university blueprint of best practice. So that staff members who engage in SaP well are recognised for that. And we also want to generate a sense among academics that, 'wow, when I partner with students in curriculum, teaching and assessment changes.' We want academics to see that SaP enriches their experience. (Nancy, staff (academic in discipline), female)

Below, Abby indicates that when SaP is implemented in alignment with its core values, it has the capacity to change university culture and test the limits of what is currently conceivable in the space.

> I think if we partner, genuinely, students and staff together, then we can shape as much as we want to. I don't see any caveats to it, but it has to be genuine, collaborative partnership. That requires staff giving up some of the power they've traditionally had. (Abby, staff (academic in central T&L unit), female)

Raising issues of academic resistance A number of participants spoke of resistance they faced or expected to face when gaining approval or cooperation from others to undertake their projects. This resistance is visible in both Abby and Nancy's quotes above, Abby identifying that staff need to give up some power and Nancy discussing the need for staff markers in performance management systems. Resistance to SaP was framed as stemming from academic staff rather than professional staff or students. There were no instances where interviewees mentioned student resistance. Academic resistance was understood as disinclination and opposition among staff to working with students collaboratively beyond the traditional teacher-student hierarchy.

Given that SaP was seen to destabilise the notion that teachers hold more power than students, interviewees identified that some (other) academic staff at their universities felt threatened by the idea. Several staff participants spoke of resistance to partnership as an ongoing and internal institutional process, while some students spoke to the issue through experiential accounts of interactions with academic staff. Rick highlighted a struggle that many addressed: the idea that academics resist because they are 'stuck in their ways':

> There will always be people who will resist or feel threatened by a new way of looking at things. In the same way as many colleagues have found the move to less or no lectures and more face-to-face or blended/online engagement a difficult transition. Particularly for those used to doing the same thing for a number of years. (Rick, staff (academic in central T&L unit), male)

Some staff participants explained resistance to partnership and institutional change in terms of real or perceived threats to job security. Nancy commented that resistance could also be understood as reactionary and motivated by feelings of uncertainty and vulnerability in the evolving culture of universities within a neoliberal context.

> …saying deeper engagement with students through partnership … will be useful, can bring up unusual reactions… Universities are definitely experiencing a phase where people are feeling vulnerable. Universities are [asking] more, and a lot of the time new initiatives could be read in new ways. People who are feeling the pressure and threat will always read it in the worst way: that you can do this better, and you should improve. I think the environment is getting more competitive … Universities are also becoming more demand-driven. More of a business mentality is emerging …. (Nancy, staff (academic in discipline), female)

These comments carry the strong implication that the neoliberal consumer model is potentially detrimental to both staff and students.

Discussion

Engaging students as partners in teaching and learning is becoming a 'hot topic' in higher education (Healey et al. 2016). Scholars have characterised the recent emergence of SaP as a reaction to the increasingly neoliberal, 'students as consumers' rhetoric influencing higher education policies and practices (Cook-Sather and Felten 2017; Healey et al. 2014; Matthews 2017b). SaP as a counter-narrative to perceived neoliberal agendas resonated with participants in this study, who conceptualised SaP as a value-based proposition that emphasised interactions between learners and teachers.

The values and relationships that participants suggested were necessary for, and characteristic of, partnership resonated with the literature (Cook-Sather et al. 2014; Healey et al. 2014). Participants conceptualised SaP practices as reciprocal and collaborative and stressed the need for respect, trust, and communication. The ways many of the participants talked about SaP both as a concept and in practice resonated with notions of liminal space and suggested an ethic of care. Below, we utilise these lenses to analyse the results, note other significant themes from our findings, and discuss the limitations of our study.

Liminality and an ethic of care

Across our results, a number of key conceptual themes emerged. As an 'in-between' space where individuals can challenge assumptions and roles at universities (Cook-Sather and Felten 2017), liminality became a useful lens through which to view our results. Liminality originated as a way to conceptualise the notion of being on a threshold during rituals, where one stage in a person's life was not fully over but the next had not fully begun (Boland 2013). Cook-Sather and Felten (Cook-Sather and Felten 2017, p. 6) posit liminality as 'space within which reciprocity unfolds through the practice of partnership' where they shift from a notion of transitional space to liminality as a form of suspension through which one engages—and perhaps transforms.

Many participants described SaP in ways that resonated with Cook-Sather and Felten's (2017) reframing of liminal spaces that allowed them to interact more equally to create projects

together. By positioning both parties as co-learners, SaP was conceptualised as having the capacity to dissolve deep-seated hierarchical boundaries that traditionally separate and designate the roles of 'staff' and 'student'. In the liminal space, SaP gives permission for both staff and students to consider and enact new identities as mutual learners. This process of conceptualising roles in different ways disrupts traditional arrangements and has personal implications. Not only do students and staff go through a mutually beneficial process of negotiation with one another in the liminal space, they negotiate and redefine their own roles and identities.

By viewing our findings through the lens of liminality, we suggest that SaP delivers transformative experiences to those involved. This conception aligns SaP with visions of higher education as a public good, a site for positively shaping individuals. Barnett (2010) envisions higher education as grounded in an ethic of care, where students care about advancing their learning, and teachers care about fostering the personal and intellectual transformation of their students. In this sense, an ethic of care lens illuminates questions about the extent to which students are able to actively shape who they are becoming, and how that unfolds, in universities in ways that challenge neoliberal discourses of pre-determined outcomes (Barnett 2007; Noddings 2005).

Barnacle and Dall'Alba (2017) argue that care is not interchangeable with collaboration or collaborative learning, which was typically evoked by our interviewees, but rather is an embodiment of practice that encourages 'students to take a stand on what they are learning and who they are becoming (p. 1330)'. Cook-Sather and Felten (2017) extrapolate an ethic of care to a vision of higher education where students and staff are dedicated to enriching *each other* as human beings and seek to test what could be possible in society. They see the presence of liminality entangled with reciprocity, and therefore partnership, as crucial to everyday life as citizen of the world where SaP creates space "to accommodate contingency and responsiveness as especially promising for the ways they welcome the 'as-if', the generativity of marginality, the suspension of the 'what-has-been' and the 'what-is' to allow the trying out of the 'what-could-be'" (Cook-Sather and Felten 2017, p. 187).

The lenses of liminality intertwined with reciprocity and an ethic of care extends interviewees' conceptions of SaP as a form of cultural change. It offers new ways of imagining SaP as an act of caring that reframes the relational elements central to partnership towards more personally transformative outcomes that resonate with broader collective and community goals of higher education as a social good.

Scope of and inclusion in partnerships

We see the institutional-level projects conducted in the TPP as a natural 'first step' in SaP; as for academics, partnering with a small team of students is presumably perceived as an easier task than collaborating with all members of a university class. There is research in SaP practice at the classroom level, where projects involved a whole class or are focused on classroom practices (Bovill 2017; Cook-Sather 2010; Williams et al. 2011). The exclusivity of institutional-level projects in our sample indicates a tension between conceptions of SaP. Practitioners note that it transforms the traditional student-teacher relationship, but the actual practice of SaP was not within the classroom.

In our sample, the projects involved students working with university staff members in their capacity as academics or project officers. It therefore seems most appropriate to discuss the student and staff member relationship, rather than the student and teacher relationship, as

undergoing transformation. Nevertheless, our participants spoke of the student-teacher relationship as being affected by SaP; they spoke of university employees as academics, staff members, and lecturers. This indicates that practitioners of SaP feel that its influence can extend beyond the confines of their positions in an institutional project to affect their identities within the classroom.

Yet, by remaining at the institutional level, SaP is unlikely to be inclusive beyond a small, privileged group of students (Bovill et al. 2016, Bovill 2017; Bryson et al. 2016; Matthews 2017b). One staff member noted that her project team had no mature-age students, no individuals raising children, and no students who mostly watch lectures online. This example is indicative of the diversity issue associated with institutional-level partnership. Institutional-level projects tend to limit participation to students who have spare time for extracurricular activities or additional courses, students who have the self-confidence and cultural capital required to work comfortably with academics, and in the case of unpaid roles, students who are financially secure enough to volunteer their time (Curran and Millard 2016; Felten et al. 2013; Peseta et al. 2016). Hence, institutional-level SaP projects are not accessible to a diversity of university students unless particular attention is paid to recruiting students who are traditionally underrepresented (Bovill et al. 2016).

These projects also present barriers for staff. They risk being perceived as part of an institutional agenda directed by a university's senior management to increase student satisfaction and an institution's ranking in league tables. Such perceptions can align SaP with the neoliberal pull in higher education, leading to resistance from staff members who genuinely believe in the values of partnership (Bovill et al. 2016).

Resistance

A perception of academic resistance to SaP emerged from our interviews, similarly to findings in the literature. Bovill et al. (2016) emphasise that academics' existing habits or perceptions of students can lead to feelings of resistance towards partnership. Our data support this, but also suggest that threats to job security and academic agency are also motivators of resistance. Academic resistance to partnership is understandable, as it challenges deep-seated norms in the university and pushes participants into an ambiguous, liminal space. Becoming comfortable in this setting takes time, and each partnership arrangement is unique. However, some interviewees viewed this resistance as an obstacle to be overcome. In some cases, this led to a desire to universalise SaP across the university in a top-down, managerial fashion, an approach at odds with the specific nature of partnership arrangements as mutual learning compared to neoliberal agendas in higher education.

Notably, student resistance to SaP was absent from our data, although the literature notes that student resistance does occur (Bovill et al. 2016; Seale et al. 2015). The absence of student resistance in our data could indicate an implicit assumption that all students would be open to partnership. SaP emphasises a nuanced and reciprocal view of its participants, which recognises that both students and staff have the right to agree, discuss, and dissent.

Reinforcing neoliberal agendas

While a desire to universalise SaP indicates enthusiasm for the concept, the underlying assumption common within interviews (although not all) that SaP is something suited to everyone brings with it particular issues. An example of this is the comment about integrating

SaP into performance management for staff within universities. While stated with good intentions, this output-based approach to SaP reinforces the neoliberal model of higher education, which steers institutions towards key performance indicators and the delivery of a universal, pre-packaged educational product. This is at odds with the collaborative nature of SaP, where outcomes are often not pre-determined, as students and staff decide on a path together through dialogue (Bovill 2017; Cook-Sather and Felten 2017; Healey et al. 2014; Matthews 2017b). Another example is the use of language employed by Nicole, that of 'using students as partners'. While intended to signal equitable and reciprocal relationships, the idea of 'using students' reinforces a hierarchical and competitive dynamic between students and the staff that undermines claims of reciprocity while playing into neoliberal discourses.

SaP has been discussed within the context of, and positioned as a reaction to, neoliberal agendas (Cook-Sather and Felten 2017; Healey et al. 2014; Matthews 2017b). Our participants also recognised that SaP holds the potential for pushing universities away from a neoliberal model and towards deep, transformative education. However, as Barnett (2010) argues, the 'marketised university' is here to stay. Indeed, the 'performance management' approach to SaP detailed above indicates its pervasiveness. Our interviewees were seeking to expand new, disruptive concepts like SaP through mechanisms associated with neoliberal agendas, sug-gesting that SaP's ideals could be appropriated for neoliberal purposes. Yet, Barnett (2010) reminds us that the marketised university is not necessarily a critical issue as there is no certainty that it will create passive students because as students recognise they are purchasing a product, they may put in greater efforts towards their learning (Barnett 2010).

Barnett (2010) argues that this leaves universities with a challenge of balance. It is crucial to heighten the virtuous aspects of higher education, while addressing the *potential* pernicious elements of an entrenched marketised university: such as exacerbating inequality and reducing the quality of teaching and learning. The practitioners we interviewed conceived of SaP as a transformational practice that disrupted transactional models and gave both students and staff a deep and high-quality learning experience. Thus, SaP is a potential solution to Barnett's challenge, for it can be a means to address the risks of the marketised university while enhancing the capacity of higher education to nurture meaningful learning.

Limitations

Our study is heuristic and exploratory, meaning we were limited to the participants involved, and note our participants volunteered for this study. Secondly, this study comprised qualitative research that was interpreted with our own experiences and views regarding SaP. We presented snapshot data with one-off interviews and thus did not capture how the views of the participants may have changed over time. Finally, we cannot assert claims about quality of partnerships that participants in our study were engaged in.

Conclusion

Practitioners in our study situated SaP within the broader context of higher education by discussing partnership as an alternative to traditional hierarchical approaches and neoliberal models in higher education. They saw SaP as a powerful, values-based practice which places students and staff in a liminal space that encourages a renegotiation of roles and identities. The

opportunities SaP was seen to offer universities included a subversion of power dynamics which emerge from traditional hierarchies, the creation of mutual, transformative learning, and a cultural shift to respectful and reciprocal student-staff collaboration as a new means of 'doing' higher education.

Our study offers some depth of insight into how SaP, as an emerging and contested topic, is conceptualised that suggests both potentially positive growth and a need for critical caution, when implementing such practices. The values of partnership that resonate with practitioners should be held firm when the goal becomes spreading or scaling-up SaP across institutions. Some participants' enthusiasm to spread partnership practices, while well intended, could actually undermine the values on which partnership is grounded and unwittingly reinforce the transactional, neoliberal mindset they seek to disrupt.

Creating space for those new to the concept of SaP—both students and staff—to engage in dialogue, critique, and criticism so they can make sense of SaP and then choose either creative approaches, or active resistance, to participate in such practices speaks to the values of partnership. However, the risk that SaP could be appropriated for neoliberal purposes, while a legitimate concern, is not a reason to avoid it or disregard the transformative potential of SaP. Awareness of this possibility is a call to action for all those dedicated to SaP to maintain vigilance in openly and critically discussing how SaP is being conceptualised, enacted, and researched.

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