'It depends': Exploring the context-dependent nature of students as partners practices and policies

Mick Healey [a] and Ruth L. Healey [b]

[a] University of Gloucestershire, Cheltenham, UK, and Healey HE Consultants, Howden, UK

[b] Department of Geography and International Development, University of Chester, Chester, UK, and Healey HE Consultants, Howden, UK

Contact: mhealey@glos.ac.uk

> *"For me context is the key - from that comes the understanding of everything."* Kenneth Noland (1988; cited by Gibbs, 2010, p. 1)

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT

In running workshops and presenting keynotes on students as partners (SaP), one of the most common answers we give to questions is, 'It depends'. The breadth and complexity of practices and policies surrounding SaP mean that it is often difficult to make generalisations. This difficulty is intensified by the newness of the field, at least as it relates to learning and teaching in higher education, where the term has only become extensively used in the last decade and particularly the last five years, and then only in selected countries. Unsurprisingly, the term is used in a variety of different ways (Cliffe et al., 2017).

The main reason why it is difficult to generalise is that the practices and policies of SaP are context dependent. There is a need to identify the structural, temporal and personal dimensions which define the context. Here we argue that we cannot begin to understand the processes and

outcomes of specific partnerships without taking account of the context in which they operate. This argument has implications both for how we design SaP practices and policies and how we report research and evaluation findings.

A similar case has been made in relation to educational research and development in general. Acedo (2010, p. 417), for example, argues that there is a "need to be sensitive to the context, whether in research, policy-making, or pedagogical practice." Not surprisingly 'one-size fits all' policies enacted at national and institutional levels play out differently in different contexts. This leads to a critique of attempts to identify 'best practice', as what is appropriate in one context may not be in another (Crossley, 2010). This point is made forcefully by Gibbs (2010, p. 1):

> Many context variables are so influential that extrapolation from one context to another is fraught with difficulties and leads to many errors and confusions, including the adoption of contextually inappropriate educational practices, wrong-headed explanations of local pedagogic phenomena, the alienation of teachers who know more about the crucial features of their context than do the pedagogic researchers, and a retreat into methodological obscurantism on the part of researchers, in an attempt to explain apparently inconsistent findings which are more likely due to unnoticed contextual variables.

He goes on to illustrate this claim with a host of areas in higher education research where there are exceptions to broad generalisations due to contextual differences (see also Cousin, 2013).

Our argument is that we should recognise the context-dependent nature of SaP work, see it as a strength, and be cautious of over-

generalising. The key feature of context-directed research is that it is motivated by the specific professional context in which it occurs, and "the research is successful if context-bound knowledge is developed which can better inform future action in that context (regardless of whether or not findings are seen to be generalisable to other contexts elsewhere)" (Taber, 2013, p. 127). McKinney (2015) makes a similar point about the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL): "By definition, SoTL work is local, context-specific, action research".

In this editorial we highlight briefly four inter-related areas that underpin the context-dependent nature of SaP work:

- The meaning of partnership
- The emotions, motivations, attitudes, behaviour, and values of the participants
- The aim, scale, and timeframe of the project or initiative
- The conceptual framework adopted.

This is by no means an exhaustive list, but space does not allow us to include other areas (such as, the cultural, social, economic, and political context that may help to explain some institutional and international differences in practice and policies).

THE MEANING OF PARTNERSHIP

One of the most cited definitions of staff [faculty]-student partnership is "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" (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014, pp. 6-7). As Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2014) also note, SaP should be viewed as a process: "It is a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself" (p. 7). The term 'students as partners' highlights the shifting role of students and their partners in such work. "Students as partners offer a view of student engagement that is a joint endeavour to shape and influence university teaching and learning. The language of students as partners deliberately emphasises the relational and social elements of mutual learning" (Matthews, 2016, p. 1).

Like SoTL, SaP is a 'big tent' (Huber & Hutchings, 2005). Healey et al. (2014; 2016) identify two fairly distinct literatures that adopt a SaP approach, though the term 'partnership' is not always used explicitly. First, there is the use of SaP in learning, teaching and research; secondly, there is the employment of SaP in quality enhancement initiatives where students act as change agents. Whereas examples of the first, such as peer learning and assessment and undergraduate research, are reasonably common and can involve many students; examples of the second, such as students undertaking SoTL projects with staff and students engaged in curriculum design projects, are relatively new and usually involve only a few students. Engaging students in quality enhancement initiatives as partners means going beyond collecting students' views and feedback. It may involve, for example, students co-researching the initiative, co-designing the curriculum, or acting as consultants to staff implementing innovative forms of teaching. Some of the generalisations made about SaP, such as the difficulties of scaling it

up (Bovill, 2017; Bryson, Furlonger, & Rinaldo-Langridge, 2016), apply more to this second version of SaP than to the first, particularly where the number of partners is small, and the relationships are intensive. In other words, 'it depends' on the nature of the SaP initiative you are talking about.

Who is involved as partners is a further critical question. Students may partner with a range of others as "partnerships can involve: students with students, students with staff, students with senior university administrators, and students with alumni or members of industry" (Matthews, 2017, p. 1), noting that staff includes not only academics but also librarians and learning support staff. Moreover, as we have already argued, some forms of SaP may necessarily involve selection of students. A similar point is made by Bovill (2017, pp. 1-2) who suggests that "it may be difficult, impossible, or even undesirable in some contexts to involve all students …" because "meaningful partnership requires a high level of equality and contribution from partners." Who among the staff or other partner groups is involved will also have an effect on how the group operates. This leads to the second area underpinning the context-dependent nature of SaP practices and policies.

THE EMOTIONS, MOTIVATIONS, ATTITUDES, BEHAVIOUR, AND VALUES OF
THE PARTICIPANTS

"To do SaP work one must be willing to be uncertain, open,
receptive, responsive as well as tentative, humble, courageous, and
daring through the give-and-take of developing and sustaining partnership
work" (Cook-Sather, 2018). In other words, we need to acknowledge the
emotional as well as the intellectual and practical work involved in
partnership and the affect that different emotions have on partners and
partnerships. Research into emotional affects in the workplace, has
demonstrated that positive affects create supportive working practices
and the maintenance of social bonds (Fredrickson 2001; Niven et al.,
2012), whereas negative expressions, such as anger can provoke
reciprocal negative feelings (Williams, 2015).

It is reasonable to assume that similar patterns will emerge within
students as partners work, i.e. it depends on the emotions that people
bring to, and develop within a partnership, which affect both the process
of partnership itself and the potential and actual outcomes from the
partnership. Yet as Felten (2017) argued in the last issue of *IJSaP*, the
scholarly literature on partnerships virtually ignores emotion. He goes on
to make two claims:

1. We cannot understand the experiences of or outcomes for individuals in
partnerships without attending to emotions.
2. We cannot understand the interactions and relationships between
individuals in partnerships without attending to emotions (p. 3).

Emotions are related to the motivations, attitudes, and behaviours of the partners. Motivations and attitudes are critical as people often engage in partnership despite institutional policies. Motivations and attitudes underlie the subsequent behaviours of people. The attitudes and behaviours referred to in the literature are:

> mainly focused on interpersonal relationships; for example, listening to one another (Werder and Skogsberg, 2013; Powers, 2012); recognition of the different contribution partners make (Williamson, 2013); a willingness to meet others "where they are" (Powers, 2012); communicating openly and honestly (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; QAA, 2012); and, sharing a commitment to continued learning and celebrating and being proud of successes (Powers, 2012; Cox, 2004) (Healey et al., 2014, p. 29).

Many of the attitudes and behaviours of the partners illustrated in this quote can be seen as promoting a shared emotional connection and affecting the motivation of the participants to engage in partnership. In other words, these might be considered to be partnership *values*. Cook-Sather et al. (2014, p. 175) identify the values of respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility as part of effective SaP; with the Higher Education Academy (2015) extending this list further to include seven more values: trust, courage, plurality, authenticity, honesty, inclusivity, and empowerment. As emotions, motivations, attitudes, behaviours, and values of participants vary and change during partnerships, they make an important contribution to the context-dependent nature of SaP and emphasise the importance of what individuals bring to the partnership.

THE AIM, SCALE, AND TIMEFRAME OF THE PROJECT OR INITIATIVE

The *aim* of the project or initiative affects who is involved in the partnership and what they bring to it in terms of emotions, motivations, attitudes, behaviour, and values. The aim is the fundamental factor underlying the vision for any SaP work, and when in doubt about how to develop a practice or policy, the best advice is 'return to the aim'. The aim is, of course, also influenced by the national and institutional contexts, as the cultures embedded in these influence what is possible. The aim may relate to an outcome (e.g. enhanced student engagement) and/or an output (e.g. a new co-designed module), developed through the process of working in partnership.

The next two contextual factors help to clarify the aim. The first is the *scale* of the project. For example, will it operate between or within nations, within or across institutions, and/or at faculty or department level? Or is the aim better suited to a specific programme, course/module, or teaching session(s)? The discipline context is also an important factor that operates across these scales (Healey & Jenkins, 2003). Arguably it may be easier to operate at the module or unit level than that of the programme, "at least until an institutional ethos develops that values student–staff partnership" (Bovill et al., 2016, p. 206).

It is equally important to clarify the *timeframe* for the partnership. The time allowed for the initiative and the amount of time participants are expected to contribute to the project are important contextual factors. These depend, in part, on whether or not there is funding to support the project. For example, funding might be used to buy out some of the staff

time from other activities and/or pay students for their work on the project. If no funding is available, it might be possible for the project to be part of a programme of learning in which students receive academic credit for their partnership work and staff may receive recognition in terms of a contribution to their workload. "Embedding the recognition and reward of staff and students engaging in partnerships, is one way in which institutions and students' unions can embody an ethos and culture of partnership in practice" (Healey et al., 2014, p. 33).

The aim, scale, and timeframe are important features of the context-dependent nature of SaP work in practice and as research. As they are clarified, it becomes easier to envisage which conceptual framework might be most appropriate.

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK ADOPTED

Conceptual frameworks help to elucidate the nature of partnership both in theory and in practice (Cook-Sather, 2017). Context informs the conceptual frameworks we select, whilst simultaneously providing a lens through which to view context and identify what is possible. Matthews et al. (in submission) discuss different conceptual frameworks in SaP, drawing in part on the argument that theories are models that enrich understanding, structure inquiry, and support future planning (Roxå, Olsson & Mårtensson, 2007). Yet the value of different SaP conceptual frameworks may be different for different partners and partnerships, particularly in relation to the experience level of the participants involved. As Gibbs (2010, p. 1) acknowledges "if a theoretical model, or an

empirical prediction based on it, is not born out, it may simply be that it is not salient in that context – but it might still be very useful in other contexts." The notion of 'it depends' relates here both to *which* conceptual framework is adopted, and to *how* it is used.

Newly formed partnerships may utilise frameworks to support understanding as to what partnership means in their context, and what members aspire to achieve in their partnership. Alongside this, conceptual frameworks aid partners in planning how they want their own partnership to look and feel like. For example, a framework emphasising social justice may be more likely to lead to the inclusion of marginalised voices, than one simply emphasising enhancing student learning. Core to SaP is recognising that all parties have something to bring to the table. Whilst staff bring disciplinary, pedagogic, and/or research expertise and experience (depending upon the staff involved), students, among other things, bring their expertise at being students.

> Indeed, most students are neither disciplinary nor pedagogical experts. Rather, their experience and expertise typically is in being a student - something that many faculty [staff] have not been for many years. They understand where they and their peers are coming from and, often, where they think they are going (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, p. 15).

Not only do students bring this form of expertise; they also bring knowledge based on who they are, depending on the diversity of their identities—knowledge that is only recently being recognized as essential to understanding effective and inclusive approaches to teaching and learning (de Bie, Marquis, Cook-Sather, & Luqueño, in submission). This

way of looking at the different roles of staff and students in partnership projects, whilst fundamental to the process, is likely to be taken as a given in contexts where such practices are more common.

Established partnerships may use conceptual frameworks to reflect on the strengths and limitations of their current and recent partnership. As Trowler & Cooper (2003, p. 105; cited by Matthews et al., in submission) argue "Without [good, explicit] theory, experience has no meaning. … one has no questions to ask. Hence, without theory, there is no learning." Matthews et al. go on to suggest that the set of related theoretical concepts of liminality (Felten, 2016), threshold concepts (Marquis *et al.* 2016), and translation (Cook-Sather & Abbot, 2016), for example, provide useful tools for considering SaP and how people might be supported to understand the process of partnership. People who have experience of partnerships are arguably in a better position to reflect on partnership through these conceptual frameworks, than those who are new to this approach.

Overall, theory has value in different ways at different times in the partnership process. The nature of *which* conceptual frameworks are useful and *how* relates to the experience of the individuals and institutions of SaP practices and policies; i.e., as usual, 'it depends'.

CONCLUSION

Students as partners is an ethos. It provides a lens through which to reconsider the nature of higher education. As new approaches and ideas emerge, we will gradually discover how far change in higher

education may be accomplished through the adoption of this ethos; the 'big tent' has plenty of space for yet unknown SaP processes. National political and policy agendas, of course, provide opportunities and constraints on the enactment of SaP. There is a danger, however, that some managers and policy makers may attempt to highjack the term partnership to mean increased choice for students in the HE marketplace, rather than recognise that SaP work is a counter-reaction to the neo-liberal, competition-driven, student as customer, policies promoted by many governments.

Adopting a SaP approach can be transformative, as it requires an openness to work in new ways. SaP "is a radical cultural shift from staff making decisions to benefit students toward a mindset where students and staff are working together – as colleagues, as partners, as trusted collaborators – with shared goals" (Matthews, Cook-Sather & Healey, 2018). SaP involves a radical rethink of the power relationships between staff and students, which encourages them to co-create knowledge, co-design the curriculum, and to learn together. However, the reality of partnership is that it is messy, constrained by context, and all parties should be prepared to some degree to 'occupy' different spaces, if it is to be successful. There is a natural feeling of uncertainty and fear. Recognising this, developing resilience, and demonstrating compassion to each other, are useful ways of beginning to cope with this tension (Gibbs, 2017; University of Hertfordshire, 2018). Nevertheless, despite the uncertainty and messiness of engaging in partnership, it can be an amazingly affirmative and stimulating experience for all parties (Cook-

Sather et al., 2014; Healey et al., 2014). With an open mind to make the most of the opportunities provided by the context in which you find yourself "the ideology behind 'it depends', also leaves room for 'it will be', or even 'it can be'" (Ntem, 2018).

We have argued in this editorial that SaP practices and policies are worked out within a context, which includes the meaning of partnership; the emotions, motivations, attitudes, behaviour, and values of the participants; the aim, scale, and timeframe of the project or initiative; and the conceptual framework adopted. Attempting to divorce SaP research and decision-making from context is problematic. Recognising the importance of the context-dependent nature of SaP should enhance our understanding of partnership practices and policies. Hence, we need to ensure that in our presentations and publications we report the context of our studies and be wary of over-generalising. Attention to context provides a more nuanced approach, than one in which context is ignored. So, as far as we are concerned, we will continue to answer many questions about SaP with, 'It depends'.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Mick Healey is an HE Consultant and Researcher at Healey HE

Consultants. He is also an

Emeritus Professor at the University of Gloucestershire, UK and The

Humboldt Distinguished Scholar in Research-Based Learning at McMaster

University, Canada. He is the Senior Editor of the *International Journal for*

Students as Partners.

Ruth L. Healey is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Chester, UK. In

2016, she joined Healey HE Consultants. She is a National Teaching

Fellow, a member of the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Geography in*

Higher Education (*JGHE*) and is one of the inaugural editors of

the *International Journal for Students as Partners*.

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