
**Categories:** Institutional Reform, Student-Centered Learning, Student Partnerships

**Summary**

The article examines a model for the implementation of student partnerships in a number of areas as a means of broadening student engagement. While the authors note that student partnerships are increasingly being formed in terms of subject area research and peer-learning/assessment, their model contemplates a system of engagement that extends into other areas that are potentially more central to the entirety of the learning experience. To this end, their model identifies four overlapping areas for student partnerships, all of which are surrounded by the overarching objective of deepening student engagement in a systemic manner, and are centered on the development of what they refer to as partnership learning communities: learning, teaching, and assessment; subject-based research and inquiry; scholarship of teaching and learning; and curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy (see attached figure). In each of these four areas, the authors offer some brief details or examples of the types of partnerships that can be formed. Some of these examples are relatively straight-forward and commonplace, such as peer-learning and peer-assessment, and the development of research based learning across all programs. Others, however, are less common, and worthy of further development: involving students in research in the scholarship of teaching and learning, rather than simply utilizing them as subjects of such studies, and engaging students in the development of curriculum and course design. The authors also offer a very limited, and unfortunately vague, description of the partnership learning communities that stand at the very center of the model, and thereby support the development of student-partnerships in each of the four overlapping areas. According to the authors these communities draw on the “existing models of community which focus on social learning: learning communities and communities of practice.”

The authors offer one detailed example of institutional reform that has been implemented at University College London (UCL), in which efforts to deepen student engagement centered on the use of research based learning. UCL’s Connected Curriculum framework identifies six dimensions through which the core principle of learning through research and inquiry can be implemented: students connect with staff and their research; research activity is built into each academic program; students make connections across subjects and out to the world; students connect academic learning with workplace learning; students learn to produce outputs-assessments directed at an audience; students connect with each other and alumni across all phases (see attached figure). In order to ensure that these curricular changes are being implemented throughout the institution, the College has necessarily included a review of all programs intended to assess the level to which they have established clear strategies for “working more closely with students” and developed research/inquiry based learning. The reviews offer a rubric in which each of the six dimensions of Connected Curriculum can be assessed; each program is assessed in each of the six areas as either beginning, developing, developed, or outstanding.
Conclusions

The authors assert that the main function of the model that they have devised is to stimulate “conversations about students as partners,” and to offer “faculty and students a language with which to situate their practices and policies.” As a relatively new innovation, the model needs further consideration, but according to the authors, it has already been implemented by some individuals and organizations. Further, given discussion of the model within the field of teaching and learning scholarship, it seems to offer several useful guidelines, particularly in terms of classifying areas for the development of student-partnerships, and helping to bridge the gap between the literatures on student-partnerships and teaching and learning. Finally, the authors suggest that academic discussion of the model has helped to identify several important questions pertaining to partnerships that deserve further consideration: “How do the policies and practices for developing partnerships across the four areas compare and integrate in institutions and how are institutional cultures developing a shared language for partnership?; What are the challenges, opportunities and benefits in developing partnership learning communities?; What strategies are effective for wide-scale implementation and embedding of students as partners across higher education institutions?”

Application

The utility of this article is difficult to gauge. On the one hand, its basic premise— the need to broaden student partnerships as a means of increasing student engagement—seems logical. Moreover, the article helps to define opportunities for student-partnerships, and therefore student engagement, that go beyond the norm. In particular, the suggestion that student-partnerships be formed in conducting research on teaching and learning (as co-researchers and not as subjects), and in the arena of curriculum design seems both innovative and worthwhile. On the other hand, the article provides little in the way of practical direction or detail. As a result, any effort to develop the type of partnerships suggested by the authors would necessitate a great deal of additional research. Perhaps most problematic in this sense is the failure of the authors to develop in any meaningful way the crucial component they refer to as partnership learning communities. Given these limitations, the article offers an overarching model for the broadening of student-partnerships as a component of our efforts to reform higher education, but does little in the way of providing solid guidelines for doing so.

Citations of interest

Bryson, C (ed.). Understanding and Developing Student Engagement. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014)


