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People, Partnerships and Pedagogies

Deeper student-teacher partnership in 5 steps: Adopting a design thinking approach to foster community building and personal development

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Students as Partners initiatives have the potential to enable students and staff to collaborate on improving the teaching and learning experience (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). Following two iterations of a students as partners initiative applied across different disciplines to enhance student-teacher partnership, an implementation strategy was established through a 5-steps process of recruitment, active listening, review, co-design, and evaluation. The proposed model established deeper partnership during the learning process, delivering significant changes that enhanced students' learning instead of the typical iterative design at the end of the learning period (course). The partnership contributed to student partners' development through an experiential learning process. Integrating learning theories and practices with human-centered design, we explore the research question: How do we nurture a deep student and teacher partnership for positive impact? Underpinned by Argyris & Schön's (1974) double loop learning and design thinking the 5-steps approach resulted in greater student experience and satisfaction, enabled the development of a sense of community and personal development for student partners and course convenors.

Keywords: Students as partners, design thinking, participatory co-design, experiential learning, double loop learning, personal development, community building

Background & introduction

Partnership between students and teaching staff embraces contributions from the collaboration of both parties, leading to a conceptual co-design experience of higher education teaching and learning and building a community of practice, also known as Student as Partners (SaP) (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). In this paper, we expand on the concept by establishing a deeper relationship with our student partners through a 5-steps approach starting with recruitment, active listening (empathise), review (define), co-design (ideate & prototype) through to evaluation (test) with the processes in bracket reflects the design thinking stages (Deitte & Omary, 2019). The formation of student-teacher partnerships through the proposed method engaged students in an enriched co-design process throughout the course. The standard post-course evaluation model, which often leads to iterative design based on student feedback collected at the END of the learning process (course), only provides opportunities to respond to the feedback in the next delivery cycle. The proposed method in this paper emphasises reciprocity in the student-teacher partnership based on critical reflection on the students' learning experience through a co-design process with student partners **DURING** the learning process (course). This can have an instant impact on the student cohort delivering innovative outcomes through a co-designed process and addressing students' learning needs in real time. As a meaning of deeper partnership, this proposed model promotes students' personal development and belonging in addition to partnership in academic achievement.

The 5-steps approach has the potential to deepen student-teacher partnership, integrating user-oriented design strategies to nurture students' development and wellbeing. Employing design thinking in the partnership places the students at the heart of the learning process (empathise), critically reflecting on the learning challenges (define) from both student and teacher perspective (Deitte & Omary, 2019). Adopting design thinking methodology in the student teacher partnership is a way of solving problems collaboratively to address students' needs. Student teacher partnership create opportunities for open discussions about how students feel in the learning journey and empower students to take ownership of the situation for positive change (Hill et al., 2021), to challenge assumptions and potentially improve negative experiences through a double looped learning process (Argyris & Schön, 1974). The 5-steps approach incorporates experiential learning theory to enhance students' learning by doing and to build reflection based on co-design prototypes to cultivate personal development and leadership (Kolb, 1984). The 5-steps approach, based on the authors' experience, can be defined as:

Step 1 Recruitment The 5-steps approach requires an active listening, empathy building and an inclusive

approach to solving problems as a team (Tim, 2009). **People, purpose, and vision** are at the heart of collaboration and essential at the recruitment stage. Students need to know why they should join the initiative, the expectations and how much time and effort is required in the partnership. Communication during recruitment provides an opportunity to clarify the why, what, and how (purpose and vision) of the partnership role and introduce the concept of partnership. Setting up a mutual goal and purpose from the beginning is the motivating factor for the collaboration. The initial communication also sets the tone for the collaboration as open, respectful, and inclusive. The number of students who volunteer as partners can be unpredictable. The number of people in the conversation can also impact on individual's feelings when raising their opinions. Depending on the size and situation of the course, the convenor may limit the number of student partners during recruitment.

Step 2 Active listening (Empathise) Once the team of student partners is organised the convenor sets up guidelines for communication to create an open and safe environment to talk, **empathy, inclusion, and active listening** are the keys in communication (Carla & Roberto, 2014). From the convenors' perspective, it is important not to make assumptions or provide all the solutions. Guided by a human-centered design thinking process course convenors empower student partners to actively engage in problem analysis and problem solving through a teamwork-based approach (IDEO, 2015). In this step, the convenor acts as a conversation facilitator and asks questions to understand the learning experience from students' perspective. Based on the topics identified in the discussion, student partners then reach out to the cohort with a survey to gain a deeper understanding of the learning experience from a diverse perspective. Again, empathy is the key for communication between student partners and the cohort. This step is also an opportunity for double loop learning to identify and understand the issues in the course design (Argyris & Schön, 1974). As the cohort may not feel comfortable talking to the convenor the student partners become a channel for students to discuss their thinking and feelings with their peers. Once feedback is gathered from the cohort, teamwork strategies can be implemented such as brainstorming, mind-mapping, and focus groups to analyse the problems identified. Feedback from the cohort happens synchronously throughout the course. Acknowledging student diversity and inclusion practices are important in teamwork and the student partners' communication to the cohort. One of the differences students as partners made in the review process is having a collective and diversified perspective on understanding the issues.

Step 3 Review (Define) Following the active listening stage, student feedback is put through an analysis phase in the student-teacher partnership, followed by a decision-making process to consider an implementation strategy for the feedback provided. Some of the key considerations applied during the review stage include: alignment to the intended partnership goals, change delivers instant improvement in educational value for the cohort without impacting on (1) learning opportunities, (2) policies nor governance requirements, and (3) opportunities that promote personal growth and community building. The review process also promotes transparency in teaching design and delivery. Student partners become the conduit between the wider student cohort and the teaching team through effective partnership, creating a greater level of understanding and student buy-in for the decisions made.

Step 4 Co-design (Ideate & Prototype) Once a decision is made to implement ideas based on the feedback received, it is important that student partners be **empowered and enabled** during the process of co-design. Student partners contribute to the creation of new learning and teaching resources or strategies addressing the issues raised by the individual who offered the feedback and removing the barrier between the course convenor and the cohort. One of the suggested approaches is to engage in a double loop learning process where the partnership works together in a project team to challenge the assumptions of the change (Argyris & Schön, 1974). The inclusion of student partners in the co-design of novel resources is aimed at mutually beneficial for all parties involved. The co-design experience also promotes personal development opportunities for student partners through experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), which is another form of reward from the partnership.

Step 5 Evaluation (Test) Following the implementation of a change, it is important to measure the effectiveness and understand the impact on students' experiences. **Reflecting on the experience** allows the teacher to identify key challenges **to create sustained changes or measures** to continue to deliver an improved learning experience in future iterations. Changes are shared, celebrated, and measured for effectiveness through an online questionnaire containing both quantitative and qualitative metrics targeting student satisfaction, impact on student learning and the development of a sense of belonging to a community. A reflection meeting was held at the end of the partnership program for both parties to discuss the challenges as well as outcomes from the partnership with specific focus on community building and personal development (Cowan & Harte, 2023).

Research methodology

Between February 2022 to June 2023, student-teacher partnerships were established in small (less than 50 students) to large (more than 400 students) courses from both STEM and non-STEM disciplines. Student partners were recruited at the start of each teaching period. Regular meetings were set up on a fortnightly basis where the participants discussed learning challenges with teaching academics with the intended partnership goals in influencing student learning experience. Authors employed active listening (Carla & Roberto, 2014), design thinking (Deitte & Omary, 2019) and double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1974) approaches during the teaching period to enhance the reciprocity of the partnership. At the end of every teaching period, student partners were invited to an informal discussion (qualitative) about the partnership experience and all students were invited to complete a standardised course evaluation survey exploring course satisfaction (Rodrigo et al., 2022). The data was analysed by comparing mean differences of student satisfaction ratings to the same course without the student partner program in prior year. Ethics applications were not obtained given that the studies were conducted with students enrolled in the course as part of the learning and teaching quality assurance processes.

Case Studies and findings

In this paper, we share three distinct student partnership experiences from STEM and non-STEM courses starting with student partners in their first year of a degree program, to second, third and final year. Case studies presented here highlight a range of partnership strategies in response to student diversity and learning needs.

Empathy, teamwork, problem solving - 1st year course - building a student network and online course engagement to help students settle into university

The Animation foundation course was delivered in hybrid format with 44 students in their year 1 of a bachelor's degree, consists of both local and international students. During the pandemic, most students would have been studying in high school in social isolation. Considering the challenges, the goal for the student partnership was to **build community engagement, utilise technologies to improve students' experience online**, and help students to settle into their new journey at university. At the initial meeting, student partners and the course convenor set up goals for the collaboration and discussed strategies for building a support network for the cohort. Following the active listening and review phase of the program, the partnership opened up conversations on challenges in the students' learning journey, what **students needed as a community**, and stress factors that can negatively impact students' health and wellbeing. To tackle those issues, student partners utilised digital social platform Discord to connect the cohort and planned online and in-person hangout events such as games nights and lunch meetups. Student partners and the convenor co-designed in class activities using digital technology GatherTown that students can engage group work in interactive virtual space. Furthermore, student partners and the convenor teamed up for an end-of-term student work screening on campus and online as a measure to battle the negative impact of social isolation. The screening created opportunities for students to connect with each other as well as celebrate their achievements with peers, family, and friends. This prototype of ideas then lead to a larger community festival later in the year that was the first of its kind.

Student co-designed experience with a focus on personal development for 1st/2nd years

In a large second-year Microbiology course comprising up to 400 students (2023), 20 student partners participated in the program following multiple rounds of invitations at the term's start. In the EOI (expression of interest) process student partners were invited to identify their expectations in 25 words to help the convenor understand how students perceived the role. The expectation list was used to **drive student partners' motivation** during the program. The project team involving student partners and the course convenor were introduced to each other in Week 02 of a 10-week term and the members were tasked to critically reflect on their personal learning experience in the course and explain if there was any opportunity to improve the learning experience following a brief description of the course design and delivery strategies. At this stage, it is crucial to make sure that the teacher **maintains an open mind** to students' input. Student partners were also invited to consider learning challenges at a personal level, focusing on **individual development**, which stretches beyond the boundary of the course, helping create a sustained impact in the student partners. During the program, the partnership reviewed a number of learning challenges that prompted the group to engage in a codesign process to deliver sustainable solution:

- **Suggested change to review assessment deadline due to student commitment on concurrent courses**, this change was reflected to the whole cohort and a majority agreement was reached to extend assessment

deadline by up to 3 days. The change did not impact on the feedback arrangement nor subsequent assessment task, hence was immediately implemented, and well received.

- ***Suggested change to improve student preparation towards assessment activity of the course.*** Following the challenge of a midterm test, the student partners identified the need to be better prepared for upcoming learning activities within the course, as a result – a mock final exam was proposed. The learning activity was created in multiple phases through a co-design approach where the student body was invited to contribute challenging questions in phase 1 of the activity, vote for the five most challenging questions in phase 2, question curation by the teaching team in phase 3, actual mock final exam in phase 4 and a final feedback process in phase 5 using an exemplar created through the partnership.

The changes mentioned above displayed significant outcomes through deep partnership between the student partners and the teacher, resulting in a change that promoted stronger learning support for the cohort, acknowledgment of the diverse needs of students, as well as an opportunity for personal development.

Work integrated learning – 3rd to 4th year – deep partnership in community of practice and student belonging

When face to face classes were resumed in 2022, the changes in learning environment and the ***impact of social isolation*** became an obstacle for the learning journey. The core issue identified with help from the student partners were how to ease the impact and boost ***a sense of belonging as a community***. Three student partners from their final year of Bachelor of Media Arts/double degrees came onboard to collaborate on the inaugural Constellate 2022 Media Arts Showcase. As a work integrated learning project, student partners took the roles of producer, designer, editor, and coordinator in a professional context. The students-teacher partnership discussed the goal for the festival and set up personal goals as professional experience learning outcomes. The review process was also a learning path for the teacher to understand how students learn in a professional context and loop reflection into the collaboration process to further support students' learning needs. The partnership empowered students to take ownership over for their learning and test out ideas in a professional project with skills they have learned over the years of their degree. Through teamwork activities, student partners and the teacher ***built trust and gained soft skills*** that would require in the workplace. Rather than providing solutions, feedback strategies were used to ask questions to facilitate independent thinking and reflection. Student partners also reached out to the wider cohort to further communicate and collect feedback on curating the exhibition with active listening skills. Through the partnership, student partners and teacher ***co-designed the festival theme and transformed the campus into exhibition spaces that consisted of memories, stories, and feelings***. Another co-design outcome was to implement immersive technologies for a 360 campus exhibition tour to engage the community online. During the festival, students invited their friends and family to take a tour around the campus to view their work. Student partners created an audience participation installation as a centre piece for the festival. The visitors looped thread on the installation that student partners created to form an artwork called Constellation. The partnership promoted a great sense of achievement for the student partners and the community by building connection to the campus, with each other, and the wider community through shared passion and practice in Media Arts.

Findings and Conclusions

Based on the experiences of the authors in running the student partner program, the key success factor in promoting deeper student-teacher partnerships would be reciprocity. The deeper partnership model exercised through the 5-steps approach highlighted the collaboration between student and teacher during the active listening-review-codesign phases resulting in an overall improvement of student satisfaction at the end of teaching period, students in 1st year recorded 100% satisfaction score in 2022 (from 83.33% in 2021) while 2nd year students also recorded a steady increased of satisfaction score at 97% in 2023 (from 95% in 2022 and 91% in 2021). The satisfaction ratings were compared to the iterations when the deep partnership model was not employed as a course strategy. The collaboration with student partners for the in-progress students' work exhibition made a positive impact on community connection and social well-being post Covid isolation, created a student-teacher partnership-led event that promotes student-teacher-wider community connection in years to come.

An end of teaching period reflection with student partners revealed:

The student partner program was a great initiative to feel more connected to the community, and the forces that were behind our courses, our classmates were definitely more engaged with some activities that we planned together – Case study 1, 1st year student

The partnership allowed myself to play an active leadership role and be a driving force to promote change, gaining valuable opportunity to develop key personal skills such as communication and teamwork - Case study 2, 1st year student

The partnership enabled personal and academic growth, increased passion for student efficacy, improved confidence and thrive in study - Case study 2, 2nd year neurodiverse student

This opportunity was useful in strengthening my soft skills, as being in the position of a leading artist collaborating with others... I think we were successful in forging and strengthening bonds between teachers and students of different disciplines – Case study 3, 3rd year student

While the case studies presented here mainly focus on the positive outcomes from a deeper partnership with student partners through a **5-steps approach – recruitment, active listening, review, co-design and evaluation**, there are indeed challenges and limitations for those who intend to experiment with the partnership model proposed in this paper. The diversity in the students' learning needs some flexibility in each process proposed to ensure there is alignment of visions or goals shared between the partners. The study relied on course measurement matrices such as overall satisfaction, future study with ethics may enable the authors to better identify the impact of the educational change brought by the program on student partners as compared to the wider student body. The partnership prompted the authors to employ new digital technologies such as GatherTown and 360 gallery in the program. Future evaluation strategies should also explore the impact of the digital technologies on student experience. Despite the limitations, the proposed 5-steps approach offers a structured framework in guiding academics towards practices nurturing deeper student-teacher partnership to deliver positive impact on learning and teaching.

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