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# Rethinking learning and teaching cultures in higher education through radical collegiality and student-staff partnerships

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## ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to the growing research interest in the quality of learning and teaching in higher education (HE). The paper argues for the rethinking of learning and teaching cultures in HE regarding learning and teaching quality enhancement. Using Fielding's (1999) 'radical collegiality' and Cook-Sather's (2015) 'pedagogical partnerships' as theoretical anchors, the paper interrogates the theory and applied practice of authentic collaboration between students and academic staff. It starts with a critical discussion of the literature on student-staff partnerships and the co-creation of learning and teaching. Drawing on data from a 2-year student-staff partnership project involving three UK universities, it reveals how authentic, collaborative and successful student-staff partnerships evolve over time, are contingent on reconfiguring the power dynamics between both parties and creating shared spaces for these beneficial situated partnerships to be developed. The underpinning values of these partnerships include shared responsibility, mutual respect and reciprocity.

Este artículo contribuye al creciente interés en la investigación sobre la calidad del y la enseñanza y el aprendizaje en la Educación Superior (ES). El artículo plantea la necesidad de repensar las culturas de enseñanza y aprendizaje en la ES con el fin de mejorar su calidad.. Utilizando los conceptos de 'radical collegiality' de Fielding (1999) y 'pedagogical partnerships' de Cook-Sather (2015) como marcos teóricos, el artículo examina la teoría y la práctica aplicada de la colaboración auténtica entre estudiantes y personal docente. Comienza con un análisis crítico de la literatura sobre el partenariado entre estudiantes y personal docente y la cocreación de la enseñanza y el aprendizaje. A partir de datos de un proyecto de partenariado entre estudiantes y personal docente de dos años de duración, en el que participaron tres universidades del Reino Unido, el

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artículo revela cómo las relaciones auténticas, colaborativas y exitosas entre estudiantes y personal docente evolucionan con el tiempo, cómo dependen de la reconfiguración de la dinámica de poder entre ambas partes, y de la creación de espacios compartidos para el desarrollo de estas colaboraciones beneficiosas y contextualizadas. Los valores fundamentales de estos partenariados incluyen la responsabilidad compartida, el respeto mutuo y la reciprocidad.

## Introduction

Monitoring, measuring and enhancing the student learning experience have become core activities of HE quality systems nowadays (Maskell and Collins 2017; Sabri 2011). In the context of learning and teaching, 'student voice' is arguably the most used term to refer to this activity. Despite its ubiquity, its meaning in terms of student involvement in these processes remains rather elusive and continues to be a contested term (Cook-Sather 2020). Added to this is the issue of the underlying purposes and agendas driving this work. Fielding's observation (2001, 123) that student voice 'is sought primarily through insistent imperatives of accountability rather than enduring commitments to democratic agency' remains as pertinent today as when he wrote it a quarter of a century ago. It is indicative of the increasing marketisation of HE and the positioning of the student as consumer. Embodied by instrumentalist policies and practices, HE continues to rely on measuring outcome-focused data (e.g. module evaluations, student completion and attainment rates), rather than investigating the processes and experiences of those at the heart of the teaching-learning interrelationship, i.e. students and academic staff.

Such instrumentalist approaches can be disempowering to students and staff. They reify the conceptualisation of learning and teaching in HE as a consumption-based input-output model, exacerbating the hierarchical divide between students and academic staff (O'Leary and Cui 2020). In this paper, we build on previous work (Cui et al. 2020) by developing a counternarrative to instrumentalism in which we argue that moving beyond the confines of such approaches requires the reconceptualisation of students' involvement as collegial partners and a change in mindset about the underpinning intentions of such work within an ethics of reciprocity (Cook-Sather 2020; Fielding 2001). It is a paper that combines empirical data with theoretical exploration to interrogate the value of reconceptualising student-staff partnerships and the 'livedness' of partnership (Cook-Sather 2020), which positions students as dialogue partners rather than evaluative consumers.

We use the term *student-staff partnerships* consistently throughout this paper to describe those partnerships that are purposefully formed between students and academic staff, with the intention of both parties working collaboratively to interrogate, understand and improve their learning and teaching experiences. As part of our conceptualisation of student-staff partnerships, we encompass what Cook-Sather (2015) refers to in her work as 'pedagogical partnerships'. This paper posits that these student-staff partnerships, underpinned by ongoing reciprocal dialogue between the two, are fundamental drivers in the quest to enhance the quality of learning and teaching in HE. Yet student-staff

partnerships do not organically appear simply by placing students and staff together. They need to be consciously cultivated, scaffolded by a framework of principles and practices that create the conditions for collegial interactions to occur between students and staff. The study discussed in this paper examines the creation, implementation and cultivation of such a framework and the implications for institutions and individuals.

The first part of this paper provides a concise narrative review of salient themes from the research literature on student-staff partnerships and the co-creation of learning and teaching in the global HE context. These themes include the nature of student-staff partnership, the value of student contributions and the importance of reciprocity and authenticity in student-staff partnerships. The second half of the paper draws on findings from a 2-year student-staff partnership project involving 38 academic staff and students from a diverse range of undergraduate and postgraduate courses working together across 10 case studies in three UK universities. Discussion focuses on the use of an innovative cycle of collaborative observation (CoCO) as a conceptual and operational tool to engage the participants in collaborative discussion and collective reflexivity on the quality of learning and teaching on their respective courses. The key findings highlight the importance of student-staff partnership in creating the conditions for meaningful dialogic encounters about learning and teaching to occur between students and staff. Impactful student-staff partnerships are the product of deliberative facilitation that provides both parties with a structured framework that empowers them to engage in situated dialogic encounters with reciprocal value.

## **Student-staff partnerships and the co-creation of learning and teaching**

A significant body of work has developed over the last two decades on student-staff partnerships and the co-creation of learning and teaching in HE, particularly in the UK, the USA and Australia (e.g. Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014; Healey, Flint, and Harrington 2014; Mercer-Mapstone et al. 2017). It is not in the scope of this paper to undertake a comprehensive review of this body of work. Instead, we draw on certain aspects to elucidate some of the key themes and debates relating to student-staff partnerships in the context of the paper's focus on enhancing the quality of learning and teaching.

### ***Conceptualising student-staff partnerships***

Matthews and Dollinger (2023, 556) use the term 'student partnership' to refer to a partnership with a pedagogical focus, where students engage with staff and their peers as co-producers, co-designers or co-creators to contribute to a greater understanding of learning and teaching. In other words, students work together with others as partners, playing an active role in informing and shaping these learning communities. They discuss the importance of a 'relational pedagogy' (561), which they perceive as being based on an ethos of shared responsibility for learning and teaching between students and academic staff. The underpinning values of this shared responsibility include mutual respect, trust and reciprocity. This concept of relational pedagogy is explored in more detail below when discussing Fielding's (1999) 'radical collegiality' and in the second half of this paper.

Dickerson, Jarvis, and Stockwell (2016, 261–262) acknowledge that the development of student-staff partnerships 'involve[s] complex and dynamic practice; interactions

between multiple participants with different conceptions and experiences of learning'. Proactively enabling a respectful, trusting and collaborative dialogue between both parties can create the conditions for a repositioning of the traditional spaces occupied by students and their teachers. It can provide an experiential, participatory learning experience that is inclusive, dialogic and has a shared purpose of enhancing teaching and learning quality. As Bourke and Loveridge (2018, 3) argue, not only can encouraging student dialogue 'mediate teachers' engagement in critically assessing their practice' (by being a reflective tool for change), but it can also serve as an opportunity to 'flatten the power dynamics in the classroom' (17). This creates opportunities for transformation for both parties in terms of developing confidence and future dialogue, along with promoting greater equity and inclusion (Marquis et al. 2021).

Following on from this, Cook-Sather (2015) argues for an approach that celebrates differences but equally finds points of connection between the two. This refers to the strengthening of student voices in a more equitable partnership in which staff voices are also recognised and heard. Similarly, Iraola, Romero, and Millera (2024, 3) agree that collaboration and reflection among teachers and students can lead to dialogue that promotes improvements in inclusive education, advocating that in education we need to shift away from the teacher as leader and instead 'place the student at the centre of the educational process' (8). Relatedly, Cook-Sather argues that student partners have 'unique forms of expertise regarding partnership work' (2023, 181).

It is useful to distinguish between generic conceptualisations of student voice, often associated with 'student as consumer' discourse and practices, and the more 'authentic' student voice that implies a level of equity and meaningful engagement between partners. Könings et al. (2021) argue that students 'dislike situations where their influence appears to be limited to giving advice without actual involvement in the implementation process' (Martens et al. 2019; Meeuwissen et al. 2019; cited in Könings et al. 2021, 927). As Santos et al. (2024) remind us, students have important and authentic things to say about their learning experiences and that when this is genuinely encouraged and acted upon, it can positively influence teachers' ability to critically reflect, reconsider and make changes to their teaching practice, and as such enhance the student learning experience. As we have argued in previous work (O'Leary and Cui 2023), authenticity is achieved not in isolation but through 'acknowledging our social interrelatedness' (Kreber and Klampfleitner 2013, 466). This view posits that authentic engagement is linked to a shared ideal of supporting students to flourish and do what is in their best interests, which can only be achieved by working collaboratively. However, due to time constraints and pressures, for both staff and students, often not enough is done to create the space for both parties to share, listen and create the relationship with each other. As discussed in the second half of this paper, ringfencing a time allowance for participation is important if institutions are to demonstrate their commitment to supporting this type of collaborative learning between students and staff. An added challenge is that not all staff may feel comfortable in opening up their practice to the scrutiny of their students and peers, for fear of the underpinning agenda driving such partnership work and what the outcomes may be.

Bovill et al. (2016, 196) identify students as a 'valuable and often unrealised resource in higher education', noting that there are reciprocal benefits for both academic staff and students from working collaboratively on teaching and learning. When students are afforded opportunities to assume 'authentic responsibility', they 'shift from merely completing

learning tasks to developing a meta-cognitive awareness about what is being learned' (Bovill et al. 2016, 197). There are parallels to Coffield's (2008, 8) conceptualisation of the benefits of 'participatory learning,' i.e. 'learning to create meaning out of our experiences; and learning what it means to know in practice'. Some of the benefits of participatory learning are illustrated in Dickerson et al.'s (2016) staff and undergraduate student collaborative action research. In analysing their data, they perceived 'working with staff provided students with an induction into a previously largely unseen world of academic practice' (259), an aspect that converges closely with the experiences of participants involved in the study discussed in the second half of this paper.

### **Power and trust**

In their critique of conventional anonymous surveys that seek to capture student voice, Könings et al. (2021, 925) emphasise the importance of assuring 'psychological safety, where power differences between teachers and learners are diminished and trust is established'. Their perspective aligns with Matthews et al. (2024), who state that joint conversations, or students merely acting as informants (Fielding 2001) or representatives (Matthews and Dollinger 2023), are not authentic partnerships. Messiou et al. (2025) argue that it is not simply a case of both parties engaging in dialogue, but 'the building of shared narrative' (134).

According to Gillett-Swan and Baroutsis (2023), a fundamental element of student-staff partnerships includes actions that have been taken to confront and reduce the power dynamics between both parties to create greater engagement, motivation and opportunity for shared discussion and decision-making. For Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten (2014), student-staff partnerships are where both parties can contribute equally, although it is acknowledged that they do not always contribute in the same ways. Matthews et al.'s (2024, 31) research on student-staff partnerships captured what students and teachers talk about in collaborative dialogue, with a focus on feedback literacy. They discovered that when both parties 'dug deeper to better understand the challenges and when staff demonstrated a genuine willingness to listen to student perspectives, rich dialogues unfolded that brought to bear on these challenges a range of insights and expertise'. These 'multi-perspectival, dialogic interactions' (ibid.) allowed both parties to engage in meaningful conversations, as partners, contributing to knowledge sharing and new insights for both parties and meaningful change, as others' research in the field has revealed (Cui et al. 2020).

Cook-Sather et al. (2021) identify trust as the key to the success of student-staff partnerships and for true reciprocity to be achieved, genuinely respecting different voices is essential. It cannot be assumed that all students or indeed teachers will feel comfortable and/or motivated by creating or being included in opportunities to share their voices. Whilst Huxham et al. (2017) acknowledge vulnerability and professional reserve as pertinent factors expressed by teachers and students, their research also elucidates how enlightening it can be for teachers to engage in this 'shared narrative' for both parties. As key stakeholders and the 'experts on their own experience' (888), it is the students who have the most 'credible epistemic salience' (890) and as such, through a shared dialogue can give teachers access to these insights and perspectives that are unique to them. This can include their social realities and their own vulnerabilities; otherwise, potentially untapped by teachers, which helps teachers recognise the differences to their own

'epistemic privilege' (897) or perceived more superior place of knowledge. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that whilst both parties may enter into this partnership with genuine intentions to reconfigure traditional hierarchical relationships, staff still occupy a position of power in their role as assessors, for example, which can arguably influence the nature of the dialogue and partnership between the two.

## Radical collegiality

In advocating for the adoption of what he refers to as 'radical collegiality' in an educational context, Fielding (1999) identifies three core strands. The first strand is the idea that there are 'dispositions and sought opportunities for teachers to learn with and from each other' (21). The second is the premise that the interrelationship between teaching and learning is underpinned by a 'mutuality of learning between the teacher and the student' (Ibid.). The third extends the lens of education beyond the classroom context, viewing it as a communal practice that needs to involve the wider community such as parents and other stakeholders. It is the first two strands that we are principally concerned with in this paper. That said, while the focus of our study does not involve the wider community, the principles of viewing education as a 'communal practice' provide an important axiological lens through which to mediate the student-staff partnerships in our project.

For Fielding, the 'radical' element of his conceptualisation of collegiality resides largely in the fact that students are considered equal learning partners with their teachers, disrupting the boundaries of traditional hierarchies and reconfiguring relationships between the two. As he argues, 'the agents of the reconfiguration turn out to be those traditionally regarded as the least able and least powerful members of the educational community' (21). There are clear connections between Fielding's conceptualisation of students and that of Cook-Sather in terms of recognising the reciprocity of learning of both students and staff, valuing their unique perspectives, and confronting directly issues of power and responsibility to build equitable student-staff partnerships from which shared narratives can emerge.

Fielding's theory of radical collegiality is ultimately about acknowledging the centrality of relationships in education and the crafting of those relationships between teachers and students. This connects with the notion of relational pedagogy referred to earlier inasmuch as if we acknowledge that learning and teaching are relational processes, it follows that inquiry into these processes and experiences is inherently relational. Through the teaching-learning interrelationship, students and staff are involved in dialogic interactions in which they continuously come together to negotiate meaning/understanding and make sense of their respective subject matter. Fielding argues that for authentic learning to occur, there needs to be openness and a reciprocal learning relationship between the two. He goes on to argue that once reciprocity becomes embedded in these relationships, it is not just a mutual understanding of the perspectives of each party that is formed, but the learning itself of both parties becomes mutual. There is a shared recognition that both parties can be learners and teachers. He refers to a 'pedagogy of care' to describe these relationships, which have within them 'a dialogic imperative which binds both student and teacher' (23), which challenges and disrupts traditional teacher-student roles and interactions. This 'dialogic imperative' is fundamental to creating collegial relationships between

the two, where both undertake a shared commitment to being attentive to one another's experience of the teaching-learning relationship.

For Fielding, the reciprocal value of these student-staff partnerships is central to the authentic learning of both parties, which aligns closely with Cook-Sather's work on Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) and pedagogical partnerships (Bovill, Cook-Sather, and Felten 2011; Cook-Sather 2015). An added dimension that Fielding brings to his thinking on the value of student-staff partnerships is their importance in supporting teacher learning:

... teacher professionalism needs to incorporate an expectation that teacher learning is both enabled and enhanced by dialogic encounters with their students in which the interdependent nature of teaching and learning and the shared responsibility for its success is made explicit. (Fielding 2001, 130)

Fielding's focus on teacher learning sheds much-needed light on an area of practice that has rarely included students. Approaches to teacher learning in HE have largely been based on teachers learning with and from each other, both in terms of formal learning programmes and informal teacher learning initiatives. In this sense, the idea of students contributing to teachers' understanding and enhancement of their practice arguably remains peripheral in HE.

The equality of roles and relationships that Fielding has in mind with his notion of radical collegiality is one in which 'teachers are also learners and learners also teachers' (1999, 24). This chimes with Cook-Sather's (2006) work that democracy is a key tenet underpinning this conceptualisation of equality between teachers and students, enacted through the 'nurturing of dialogic dispositions, structures and cultures which shape and transform the way we think and act together as partners' (Fielding 1999, 26). These 'dialogic dispositions, structures and cultures' are the driving force of Fielding's radical collegiality, as it is through collegial dialogue that shared reflections, meaning making and action occur. These dialogic encounters also offer the potential for new insights and understandings about learning and teaching to occur. This also resonates with Bowden and Marton's (2004) work on 'collective consciousness' in which they emphasise the value of learning from others and how combining differing perspectives can result in richer, more powerful insights into the phenomenon.

In this second half of the paper, we now move on to discussing the research methodology and findings from a 2-year student-staff partnership project involving 38 academic staff and students from a diverse range of undergraduate and postgraduate courses working together across 10 case studies in three UK universities.

## Research methodology

The underpinning aim of the project was to increase student engagement in shaping their learning and teaching experiences by empowering them, as observers and collaborators, to become directly involved in informing and improving the quality of learning and teaching on their course/module. Our key research questions were:

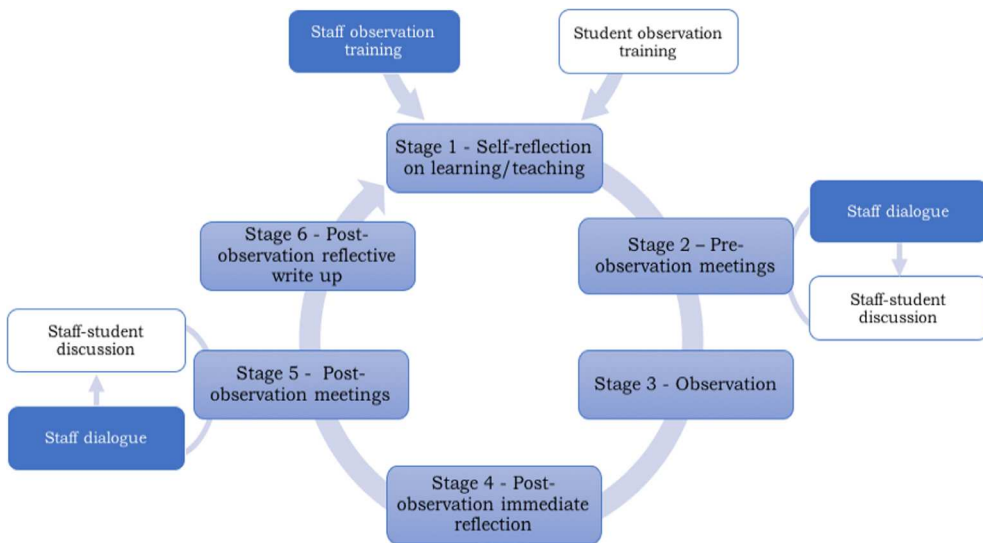
- What are the key factors that contribute to successful student-staff partnerships?
- How do these student-staff partnerships evolve over time?
- What are the benefits gained by both parties?

## Research design

The research design adopted a qualitative approach, which comprised 10 ‘case studies’. For us, the appropriation of the term ‘case studies’ was a useful label to denote the distinct groups of staff and student participants within each participating institution. It also aligned to the overall philosophy and practice of conducting the research. However, it is important to stress that we did not adopt a strict case study design, nor did we induct our participants into a case study research methods approach. A range of rich qualitative data was collected in collaboration with the case study participants. This included participants’ observation notes, written reflective accounts, teaching resources and two rounds of online focus groups with each case study recorded on MS Teams.

The research was designed to mobilise the Cycle of Collaborative Observation (CoCO), as the scaffold for building student-staff partnerships, drawing on research from a previous project where we have discussed its conceptualisation and implementation at length (O’Leary and Cui 2020). CoCO is a unique model of observation (see Figure 1) in that it brings together academic teaching staff and students as co-observers and co-reflectors. It is underpinned by the ethos that improving student learning requires students and staff to develop a reciprocal, contextualised awareness and understanding of their learning and teaching and what it means to learn collaboratively at course level. CoCO provides a structured framework for students and staff to critically reflect on their learning and teaching practices and exchange their observations and reflections with each other. It provides them with conceptual and practical tools to promote authentic collaboration and inquiry into the quality of their learning and teaching.

There were six stages to CoCO (See Figure 1): (1) pre-observation self-reflection, (2) pre-observation collaborative discussion, (3) observation, (4) post-observation reflection, (5) post-observation discussion between participants, and (6) a reflective write-up. Throughout each stage of CoCO, there were opportunities for all the participants to



**Figure 1.** Cycle of Collaborative Observation (CoCO).

share verbal and written reflections with the project team. This was especially important given the effectiveness of staff and students working together as co-reflectors, co-observers and co-researchers, with this data feeding directly into the project's evaluation.

Other collegiality-focused studies in HE that have included students and used observation have predominantly assigned them the role of evaluators of teaching (e.g. Scoles et al. 2021). We see this as problematic, as it exacerbates some of the recognised tensions associated with the application of observation as a method of assessment (O'Leary and Brooks 2014), as well as the reification of students as consumers previously discussed.

In contrast, our research deliberately chose to sever the link between observation and assessment in the conceptualisation and application of observation, and the roles undertaken by students and staff. Instead of using observation as a method of assessment, we applied it as a tool of collaborative, dialogic inquiry where both parties worked as co-observers, co-reflectors and co-creators of their learning and teaching experiences. We were convinced that unless we were able to remove observation from its association with assessment, this would jeopardise our efforts to capture situated examples of authentic teaching and learning and in turn to create a safe, trusting and collaborative environment for reflection and dialogue between staff and students.

### ***Participant recruitment and training***

The project involved three UK universities and took place over two academic years. The participating universities sought to maximise the impact of the project by focusing on key themes under enquiry within their institutions at the time, which included student engagement, student belonging and inclusivity, assessment and feedback. Participants across all three universities included 22 undergraduate and postgraduate students and 16 academic staff from diverse backgrounds and disciplines, all of whom were voluntary participants. Following ethical approval, participant recruitment was undertaken at a faculty/school-wide level in each institution. This started with discussions with senior faculty/school leaders to identify potential courses and staff who might be interested in participating, along with an open call to staff for expressions of interest and invitations to discuss the project informally with the project lead in each institution. Following identification of the chosen courses and staff participants, details about the project were shared with the students enrolled in these courses, and expressions of interest were invited. Both student and staff participants were required to complete an induction, which included a project briefing and an observation training programme delivered by the project team before undertaking CoCO, featured in [Figure 1](#), in their respective case studies. During the induction, participants were given participant information sheets about the project and were asked to complete consent forms.

Initially, staff and students participated in observation training with the project leads in their respective institutions. Bringing the groups together meant that institutional leads could facilitate the sharing of both parties' perspectives. This started with the reconceptualisation and reconfiguring of how participants would engage with observation as a method for inquiring and enhancing teaching and learning rather than as a method of assessment. Each case study was afforded the autonomy to select their specific focus

within the three broad themes identified by each institution. The sessions selected for observation were agreed collectively. Staff participants took responsibility for setting up the pre-observation, observation and post-observation meeting stages.

The creation of staff-student partnerships was a new experience for many participants and thus required vigilance and care to ensure that everyone felt able to contribute their voices to the project. Each institutional lead took steps to enable a positive relationship throughout the project, acting as a mediator at the beginning to facilitate dialogue and allow the participants to have time and space to develop trust. The training actively positioned the observation process as developmental and non-judgemental. It included asking participants how they would share their reflections with their academic staff. All student participants were told that the sharing of their reflective notes with the academic staff was optional. This was an important decision, as it communicated trust along with affording them autonomy as to what and how they would share in the post-observation dialogue. It also reflected observation work more generally, as all participants were therefore able to write or draw their reflections in their own way without edit or critique.

All participants were advised about anonymising students' names (not reporting directly on students in the session) and were reminded not to share their observation notes outside of the project. The project induction emphasised respect for each other's views, recognition of the unique and valued perspective that each would bring, and collective care for all those observed (including peer students in the sessions) and all those observing (mindful approaches to turn-taking and sharing observation reflections).

### ***Data collection and analysis***

As data was collected at all stages of CoCo (as mentioned previously), each case study generated a wealth of qualitative data, including participants' observation notes, written reflective accounts, teaching resources and two rounds of online focus groups, with each case study recorded on MS Teams. The purpose of collecting this data pre, during and post observation discussions was to get a sense of how the student-staff partnership was evolving over time, the benefits for both parties and the key factors that were contributing to these successful partnerships.

We adopted a two-phase approach to the data analysis for this paper. Phase one involved the lead researchers from each university familiarising themselves with the discrete data generated from both parties through their pre, during and post observation notes/reflections in each case study, in their respective institutions, and undertaking preliminary reflexive thematic analysis of these data (Braun and Clarke 2022) in relation to the research questions, which were subsequently shared with the case study participants for respondent validation. Phase two involved the project lead collating and extending the data analysis across all 10 case studies, with the aim of developing a set of common themes that showed how the partnerships evolved, the benefits and what contributed to these successful partnerships. The project lead and lead researchers in each university initially analysed all the case study data independently. Following this, they worked as a collective to identify overarching themes across the three universities.

## Findings and discussion

### *Building student-staff partnerships*

From the start of the project, staff and students were afforded multiple opportunities to come together to build a shared narrative (Messiou et al. 2025) and develop productive student-staff partnerships through shared discussion and decision making (Gillett-Swan and Baroutsis 2023). For most of the project's participants, partnership building operated under a new guise, as it required a closer understanding and knowledge of each other, a more attentive recognition of each other's perspectives on an individual level, and the development of a more horizontal collaborative dialogue between both parties. Both parties were given the opportunity to contribute equally (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014) and develop relationships over time, which meant they were able to dig deeper for greater insights in their case study inquiries (Matthews et al. 2024). As mentioned above, Matthews and Dollinger (2023) discuss the importance of a 'relational pedagogy' that works through a discourse of shared responsibility and as such rapport building between each case study participant was central to the development of these 'multi-perspectival, dialogic interactions' (Matthews et al. 2024). This started with the observation training as the first stage of CoCO and was further developed in the pre- and post-observation meetings (Stages 2 and 5) of each cycle. The project training for participants was instrumental in laying the foundations for these student-staff partnerships. The approach adopted by the institution leads was highlighted by participants as an example of the supportive and inclusive ethos embodied when working with all participants, as this extract from Yanning, a computer science lecturer on undergraduate programmes, captures:

These sessions did more than provide logistical details; they created a space where staff and students could begin building rapport, helping to establish trust and mutual respect before the formal observation began ... The combination of structured guidance and open communication meant that, as a staff member, I felt well-prepared and confident to engage in the collaborative process.

Our methodological approach was imbued with an axiology that sought to disrupt and deconstruct the traditional staff-student power dynamic and to replace it with a more peer-based relationship of equals, where students would feel that they were 'equal learning partners' whose 'contributions were valued and taken seriously'. Simran, a second-year undergraduate student from diagnostic radiotherapy, articulated this experience of deconstructing and reconfiguring the staff-student power dynamic in a focus group at the end of Cycle 2:

For me, it broke those stigmas and those stereotypes that you couldn't talk to your lecturers or talk to your staff members the exact same way as your peers ... Just being able to be confident in terms of working collaboratively in this team, talking to them not just as my lecturers but that we've broken those barriers massively and kind of shown that there is no difference between a lecturer and a student.

Simran's comments embody Fielding's (1999) conceptualisation of students and staff as equal learning partners. Being treated as equals by staff and being made to feel that their voices were valued were repeatedly identified by our student participants as core constituents of effective student-staff partnerships in the project focus groups. This

also appeared to contribute to an authentic sense of belonging and mattering for the students, as the relationships that they built with staff engendered reciprocal trust and respect for one another (Cook-Sather et al. 2021, 2025). However, it is important to acknowledge that there were varying levels of contributions from students across the case studies, with some more actively engaged with staff and their peers than others.

CoCO facilitated the deconstruction of traditional hierarchies, particularly in terms of the student-staff relationship, as the former was seen as an integral member of the academic community. For the project's student participants, this resulted in an increased sense of agency and voice in discussing and shaping their learning experiences. In addition, many of our participating students talked about how their self-confidence had improved because of feeling trusted and empowered when interacting and collaborating with academic staff. From a staff perspective, they embraced the opportunity to share their own reflections with interested students, to increase their awareness of what works and/or could work differently and felt supported to make the changes. Understandably though, some staff were initially wary about opening their practice and pedagogic decision making up to their students' examination.

When it came to the end of cycle focus groups, these student-staff partnerships had evolved significantly, as manifested by the noticeable confidence and comfort with which both parties shared their reflections and spoke openly and candidly about their experiences. There was convergence across both groups of participants in the words they used to describe their relationships across the different case studies and data sets: 'genuinely collaborative, non-judgemental, empowering, respectful, inclusive, constructive, authentic, personal'. The fostering of these relationships facilitated a different kind of interaction to that normally experienced by students and staff. As one of the staff participants put it aptly, 'the building of relationships was a real shining light in this project'.

Reciprocity (Cook-Sather 2002; Fielding 2001) featured prominently in the dialogic encounters between participants. Utterances such as 'we are all learning from each other' and acknowledgments of the value of 'put[ting] yourself in the shoes of the students' were commonplace. Laura, a lecturer who taught undergraduate psychology students, perceived a 'blurring of the lines' in the roles and relationships between staff and students, highlighting the importance of seeing students as 'colleagues' from whom staff can learn:

I think these sorts of projects blur the lines between who is a learner and who is an educator, and maybe we can be more than one at any one time. How should we be thinking of our student colleagues and our staff colleagues? If we only place the people who are staff as colleagues, I feel that we're missing out significantly on the experience in that learning setting and which to me the collaborative observation process should or hopefully starts to blur the lines between. Staff and students are all partners in this ... it then starts to already reduce some of those barriers or power dynamics that exist between the teacher having everything and the students waiting to receive that knowledge.

Laura's perception of students as colleagues resonates strongly with Fielding and Cook-Sather's thinking about the equality of roles and relationships in student-staff partnerships. The 'blurring of the lines' that she refers to symbolises the mutuality of learning between the two and the recognition that both can be learners and teachers, welcoming the interchange and the juggling of these roles as a natural consequence of authentic partnerships. Her comment about 'missing out' by only including staff as 'colleagues' also

reinforces Fielding's contention about the importance of incorporating dialogic encounters with students as a catalyst for teacher learning.

The student-staff partnerships and the open, trusting and inclusive environment (Bovill et al. 2016; Iraola, Romero, and Millera 2024) they co-created were fundamental to the sharing, discussions and collaborative working amongst case study members. Participants repeatedly talked about how valuable this partnership process had been for them to get to know each other as 'real people' and to help them to build confidence in their relationships going forward. The model of CoCO and its underpinning principles were identified as a key enabler in fostering this genuine collaboration, as Holly, a lecturer who taught undergraduate radiography students, identified in her summary of the role that CoCO played:

I think to build that relationship with your student creates a whole different engagement in the classroom because it means that they understand the meaning behind it. It's not just a case of they're coming to me to get an assessment grade. They've got their own roles and they feel like part of that academic community as well.

Similarly, Thea, an undergraduate marketing student, talked about the way in which this collaboration had transformed not only their relationship with their lecturers but had resulted in a deeper understanding and appreciation of the work that goes into preparing for teaching:

I think it's quite exciting to work with your lecturer because I feel like when you go through the school system and college, it's sort of on two separate sides. So, I think when you can work with the person who's teaching, I think not only this gives you more of an insight, but I also think ... when you are learning, you start to think 'what planning went in this', 'what am I doing', and you have more respect for your teachers.

Collegial trust, respect and equity in interactions emerged as core constituents of these student-staff partnerships, with power dynamics recognised and reduced as much as possible from the outset (Marquis et al. 2021). Although it is difficult to anticipate and assure the effectiveness of these student-staff partnerships in advance, we were committed to the purposeful involvement of the student participants in our project, as we saw this as a contributory factor in their success. Unlike other studies, such as Cook-Sather's SaLT model (2015), where students are paired with teachers who don't teach them, our student participants were actively enrolled as students in the classes that they observed in the project. This was an important element that reflected the underpinning ethos of CoCO that enhancing the student learning experience is dependent on teachers and students developing a reciprocal, contextualised awareness and understanding of their teaching and learning and what it means to learn collaboratively in the context of their course. For us, reciprocity and reciprocal value were best harnessed by building on the pre-existing frames of reference shared by students and academic staff to generate new understandings of situated learning and teaching experiences.

### ***Informing and improving practice***

From a staff perspective, engaging in 'meaningful dialogic interaction' with students through the group discussions included in CoCO was identified as a 'unique learning opportunity' and 'real evidence' that they could use to inform and enhance their practice.

The following example from Susana, who was observed teaching on a postgraduate sports management module, highlights the reciprocal value of these dialogic encounters, as well as providing an interesting comparison with more conventional modes of 'feedback' such as module evaluations:

... because it was a very big group, I wanted to know if the tasks and activities I gave them were good enough for the very different levels we have in the classroom ... they gave me feedback that I never expected and I would say that they have never given me before in more traditional ways of receiving feedback, like module evaluations. It was a great way to empower students as collaborators in the process of teaching and to empower my understanding of my students.

Although Susana uses the word 'feedback', a term often associated with the process of assessment, it belies the true meaning of the key message that she sought to relay in this focus group extract in relation to her perception of the significance of participating in this student-staff partnership. What was at the heart of Susana's observation was a recognition of the difference and value of the dialogic interactions that she engaged in with her students in collaborating through the various stages of CoCO. In stark contrast to the episodic, unidirectional flow of information with module evaluations, CoCO's reciprocal student-staff dialogue provided a shared, live forum in which to negotiate meaning and make sense of each other's perspectives. In turn, this meant that both parties were able to co-construct shared understandings of their learning and teaching experiences on an ongoing basis, which is what Susana considered empowering for herself and her students. Furthermore, the reciprocal value that Susana highlights in her comments was illustrative of what Matthews and Dollinger (2023, 566) refer to as the 'humanising ethos of student partnership as a relational pedagogy', where meaningful connections are formed between both parties through their dialogic interactions about shared learning and teaching occurrences.

In some cases, staff were able to apply the findings from their collaborative discussion with their students and peers immediately into their planning or teaching practice. In this sense, the evidence generated in these dialogic interactions provided an instantaneous source of evidence or stimulus for reflection that could be incorporated into enhancing the quality of the learning and teaching experience while the course was still 'live'.

The project generated numerous examples of students providing authentic and enabling reflective comments (Santos et al. 2024) that, at times, pushed staff to recognise that other approaches they may have used previously in other sessions could also be effective in the context of the observed sessions and/or that there was a simpler or more student-centred way to approach the focal learning point. In outlining his perceptions of the student-staff partnership in his reflective account, John, a lecturer in Human Biology, reflected on the suggestions the student participants provided in the post-observation meeting: 'A couple of these were so simple that I found it hard to believe that I had overlooked it as an approach previously'. In his account, he associated this with 'being blinded by the norm'. In the described observation, while the approach may have been known and applied in other contexts, it was not applied or considered in the context of the Human Biology session that the students and the staff observer observed. This shift triggered a further shift in his thinking as it 'highlighted the need to seek students' views on how we should be teaching rather than the current norm of only checking how much they enjoyed what we did'.

A staff participant working with doctoral researchers had a similar experience. The observed session took place in an intensive workshop taught online by three colleagues to a large group. Having been asked to focus on specific aspects of the session, the student observers' reflections suggested that summaries of the relevant learning points would have been helpful. In her written reflective account, the observed teacher remarked that she often used this strategy but decided against doing so on this occasion when planning for that observed session, as she was conscious of time limitations. While materials were shared with all the students after the workshop, she agreed that it would have been helpful to provide quick summaries at the time and/or to share some preparation material in advance. These actions subsequently became wider actions that were fed back to the course leader and became influential in improving the design of the workshop overall.

In a case study of Computer Science, one of the student observers reflected that they had 'tailored the feedback on the areas the staff participant was looking for', understanding that she had asked them to focus specifically on the clarity with which she explained the coursework. This was one example that was echoed across numerous case studies throughout the project. Having established more trusting relationships, students (and staff observers) understood that their perspectives were being deliberately sought, particularly the students, as they were not typically included in observations of teaching and learning, and thus would have a unique perspective on the taught session (Huxham et al. 2017). The reciprocity in sharing their views on areas of practice that staff actively sought feedback on, and the resulting reflections that students and the staff observers provided, demonstrated collaboration and shared endeavour. In opening up their planning and their thinking to the observers in the pre-observation meeting, all staff participants who were being observed could be said to have made themselves vulnerable. This was a new interaction demonstrating something of bell hooks' (2004, 15) reflection that 'when education is the practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess'. In the pre-observation meetings, items (planned activities, anticipated structure, etc.) were shared for open discussion with students and staff in ways that had not typically been experienced before. It is through this more vulnerable and trusting dialogue that all participants 'come into presence; that is, to show who they are and where they stand' (Biesta 2005, 62).

## Concluding thoughts

The aims of this project were to better understand how student-staff partnerships evolve over time, the benefits for both parties and the key contributory factors to these successful partnerships. A key finding to emerge was the fundamental role that student-staff partnership building plays in nurturing meaningful student-staff dialogic encounters that focus on their learning and teaching experiences. Yet student-staff partnerships do not emerge organically merely by placing the two parties together in shared spaces. They are the product of deliberative facilitation and need to be consciously cultivated if they are to result in effective outcomes, scaffolded by a framework of principles and practices that create the conditions for collegial interactions to occur between the two parties. Inevitably, this requires a time commitment on an individual and institutional level. If institutions are to demonstrate their commitment to supporting this type of

learning activity, allocating and protecting a time allowance for participation is essential. Added to this is the temporal issue in fostering these partnerships.

These student-staff partnerships require time to develop on a longitudinal basis to create deeper connections and conversations to maximise the reciprocal benefits. The Cycle of Collaborative Observation used in this project provided students and staff with a structured framework to engage in deliberative dialogic encounters, which were essential to establish and nurture these collaborative relationships over a substantive period. By collectively reflecting on and discussing their experiences and perceptions of learning and teaching together through this scaffolded approach, students and staff engaged in a process of collective sense-making and meaning, which was fundamental to enabling both parties to share and develop their insights, knowledge, skills and practices further.

From a process-oriented perspective, participants' experiences elucidated the importance of acknowledging that, as a method of inquiry, the optimum value of observation is harnessed when it is used for sustained, qualitative work, as the detailed observation notes, reflections and collaborative sense-making develop over time rather than in isolated, episodic events. Maximising its value as a vehicle for student-staff pedagogical enquiry is therefore realised by adopting a longitudinal approach that incorporates multiple observations over a sustained period, such as an academic year or longer. This enhances the overall value of observations themselves, as they invariably generate greater trust and deeper discussions over time between participants. On an institutional level, this means that there needs to be a commitment to enabling participants to have the time to engage in this type of activity longitudinally rather than episodically.

Seeing and reflecting on learning and teaching through the eyes of others enables both parties to develop reciprocal awareness and understanding of their shared endeavours. As the participants from this study reveal, the benefits of these collegial partnerships transcend the immediacy of the learning and teaching events that were the original stimulus for the dialogic encounters between students and staff. Undoubtedly, there were tangible outcomes that benefitted both parties in the immediate sense of enhancing their learning and teaching practices. Yet, it was the cultivation of a collective consciousness between the two parties as a result of learning to appreciate and make sense of each other's perspectives through these dialogic encounters that generated those deeper values of empathy and reciprocal understanding. This reinforces the importance of acknowledging learning and teaching as social practices in which the key agents need to engage in a process of reflexivity to develop this collective consciousness. It is only by cultivating and prioritising shared spaces and forums for students and staff to come together to engage in reflexive dialogue that authentic student-staff partnerships can be formed. It is time to rethink how we create space and opportunity for learning and teaching cultures to flourish, as it is only through the formation and nurturing of these deliberate student-staff partnerships that we can move beyond the confines of imperatives of accountability and be open to new ways of seeing and new ways of understanding.

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