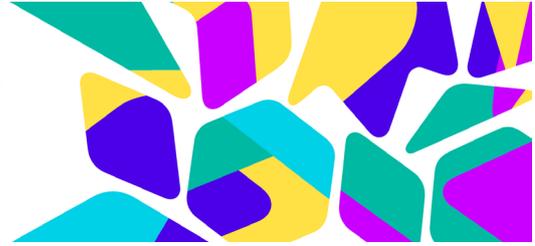# From Engagement to Empowerment: Exploring the Potential for Pedagogical Partnerships in Design

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Abstract: As the notion of co-creation, or productive partnerships between staff and students, achieves increasingly popularity across disciplinary and institutional contexts, the offshoot idea of students and staff partnering on pedagogical scholarship is gaining traction. In design education contexts, however, where the boundary between pedagogical scholarship and studio-based practice tends to be blurry, this model has yet to take hold. What might pedagogical partnerships in design look like, and what benefits might they offer to all constituent parties? This paper explores this topic, drawing connections between scholarship of design education and several well-established pedagogical partnerships around the world. The prospects of students and educators collaborating on pedagogical inquiry includes more authentic feedback loops for improving educational quality and relevance, as well as deepening students' agency in shaping their learning and development.

Keywords: pedagogical partnerships; scholarship of teaching and learning; design education; student agency

"What if equality...were to provide a point of departure? What would it mean to make equality a presupposition rather than a goal, a practice rather than a reward situated firmly in some distant future…?" (Ross, 1991, p. xix)

1. Introduction

Across levels and geographies of academia, the notions of co-creation, staff-student partnership, students as partners (SaP) and related objectives are increasingly promoted as priorities at various institutional levels (see Bovill *et al*, 2016). The mainstreaming of such concepts can be traced to the influence on education from business management trends (Urbick, 2012; Dollinger *et al*, 2018), as well as widespread concerns for diminishing student engagement, motivation and wellbeing (see Chemi and Krogh, 2017). As the author's own university administration argued in a recent set of internal documents,

co-creation is a means to counter "the feeling that a student's relationship with the University is transactional" and "the sense of disconnection and invisibility that is a genuine concern for many students." Scholars have also noted that the popularity of co-creation can be attributed to it being adopted as a) a challenge to neoliberal academic culture (e.g., by empowering students and upending hierarchical, unilateral or transactional staff-student relations) and b) then appropriated by neoliberal institutional discourse (Matthews *et al,* 2018). This duality gives co-creation a chameleon-like quality. Hannafin *et al* (1997) also highlight the near-certain gap between an institution's espoused theories and objectives, on the one hand, and its everyday educational practices, structures and environments as experienced by students.

Greater student involvement in decision-making and academic initiatives can also be understood as a form of collaborative decision-making that responds to ongoing changes in student expectations about education (Hsiao *et al.*, 2018). As confidence in conventional mechanisms for gauging student voice—such as student satisfaction surveys—is increasingly called into question, more active and authentic student involvement offers an effective alternative to improving teaching and learning quality. Finally, partnerships between staff and students present a potential cooperative, diplomatic channel to build empathy as a bulwark against emerging intergenerational antagonism, which may be manifesting in educational spaces. With so many factors contributing to the ubiquitous advocacy for co-creation, it is no wonder that it is now manifesting through an increasingly diverse array of spaces and practices (see Chemi and Krogh, 2017; Bovill *et al*, 2016).

One avenue for meaningfully involving students in academic affairs is through the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), wherein learning and teaching praxis itself becomes the object of inquiry. Although some argue that, "Good [SoTL] practice requires engaging students in the inquiry process" (Felten 2013: p. 123), or that "To be the scholarship of teaching and learning...it has to include students as final partners in that inquiry" (Bass 2013), involving students as research *partners* rather than mere subjects represents a radical shift from convention. As a subcategory of activity within co-creation and SaP, "pedagogical partnerships" or "co-creating learning and teaching" are an emerging and innovative mode of praxis that involves students contributing to teaching and learning as consultants, co-researchers, representatives and/or pedagogical co-designers (Bovill *et al*, 2016). The partnerships referenced throughout this paper serve as valuable examples for these learning and teaching-related manifestations of co-creation in higher education.

Within design-based learning environments, it would appear that sustained pedagogical partnerships have yet to come to fruition. Certainly, co-creation has reached a level of broad acceptance in design practice and design research (Sanders & Stappers, 2008). Design thinking has also been applied to develop pedagogical models based on co-creation (Androutsos & Brinia, 2019; Hakio & Mattelmäki, 2019). Marshalsey and Sclater (2018) describe one of the few reported one-off instances of co-created learning and teaching research in the design fields. Whilst sustained pedagogical partnership models are far from achieving mainstream status elsewhere, their lack of adoption in design contexts is

somewhat unsurprising given that SoTL in design fields tends to occupy a minor position to other modes and areas of scholarship (Tovey, 2013). Given the positive outcomes identified in other fields, however, it is worth asking: What might pedagogical partnerships look like in design? And what benefits might they offer—to design students, to teaching practice and to design pedagogy-focussed research?
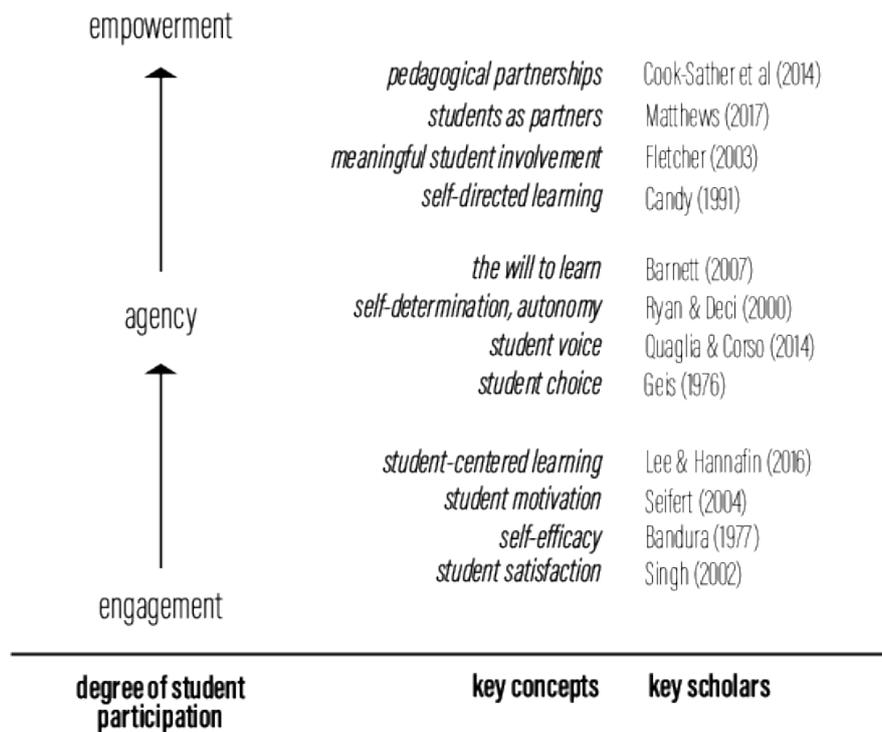

Figure 1   Key concepts and scholars along the spectrum of engagement-agency-empowerment.

Simply extending co-creation to teaching and learning domains is not in itself a particularly convincing argument. However, for those seeking more authentic modes of design student engagement, agency or empowerment, limiting applications of co-creation to *non*-pedagogical areas of scholarship would restrict students' degree of engagement in their education (see Figure 1). Certainly, opening the metaphorical doors to the scholarship of teaching and learning, not to mention handing over the keys, is unknown territory for most academics. In an effort to ease anxiety and address scepticism on the subject, the next sections draw upon recent publications of successful pedagogical partnerships to identify key benefits and challenges. The paper then concludes by reflecting on the potential benefits and challenges of adopting pedagogical partnerships in design education contexts.

2. The basis of pedagogical partnerships

Chemi and Krogh (2017) define co-creation broadly as "the process of creative (original and valuable) generation of shared meaning and development" (p. viii). This conceptual umbrella then covers the suite of overlapping and nested terms—such as students-as-partners, student-staff partnerships, partnership learning communities and pedagogical

partnerships—a common characteristic of these being a commitment to staff and students collaborating on teaching and learning activities through non-traditional social relations (see Mercer-Mapstone et al, 2017). Thus, a primary driver of these partnership is to:

> "[redefine] the roles of student and faculty not only in relation to one another but also in relation to the institutions within which we work. Partnership redefines processes and therefore our approach to analysis, pedagogical practice, and research in ways that emphasize affirmation as well as create opportunities for change." (Cook-Sather *et al*, 2014: p. 6-7)

Building on this radical basis, Matthews (2017) formulates an understanding of SaP:

> "Students as partners (SaP) is a metaphor for university education that challenges traditional assumptions about the identities of, and relationships between, learners and teachers. Through the surprising (to some) juxtaposition of 'student' and 'partner,' this metaphor imagines and makes way for respectful, mutually beneficial learning partnerships where students and staff work together on all aspects of educational endeavours. SaP offers hope for students and staff seeking relational approaches to learning—built on and through dialogue— that enable shared responsibility and joint ownership for teaching, learning, and assessment" (p. 1).

Figure 2 represents the various teaching and learning-related activities that can emerge through partnership learning communities, once certain relational features, such as those noted by Matthews above, have been established. The focus in this paper is specifically on engaging design students in SoTL, given that other initiatives and models for co-creation are already quite established (e.g., consulting student representatives on curriculum redesign or collaborative design research between staff and students).
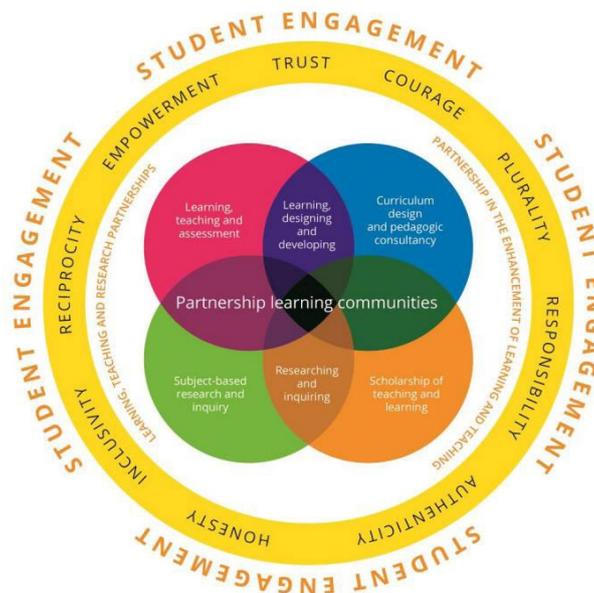
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Figure 2   Model of Students as Partners from Healey et al *(2014).*

Rather than conceiving them as independent activities, pedagogical partnerships are considered inherently linked to the scholarship of teaching and learning. For instance, Abbot (2019) makes the argument for active student participation in SoTL:

"The origins and continued heart of [SoTL] is individual instructors seeking a deeper understanding of their classroom practices in a desire to promote deeper learning. But as the field grows, we recognize the necessity of engaging students more significantly than as addendums to SoTL…When we study teaching and learning, we have an *ethical obligation* to make our work accessible to everyone who is participating in these shared purposes of higher education. If we are examining student learning, shouldn't students be able to read and respond to such research?...The key questions of SoTL – what is happening in the classroom? what and how are students learning? are our teaching efforts effective? – cannot be answered without student input, and often these questions can be better answered with student partnership."

She then continues her argument, drawing on her own experience:

"As both a SoTL scholar and a student myself, SoTL inflects my classroom experiences, my capacity to engage, and my ability to learn. My engagement in SoTL has helped me understand and articulate what supports my learning, and has given me the space to advocate for my peers and myself. It has also helped me become an ally to my faculty, as I can better interpret learning goals and hold myself more accountable in our shared learning. If teaching and learning cannot happen without students, how can SoTL?"

Involving students in pedagogical inquiry can also be driven by a desire to increase student agency and responsibility in their learning. Lee and Hannafin (2016) propose a conceptual framework for student-centered learning called "Own it, Learn it, Share it" that could be applied to student-driven SoTL research. In this framework, they recommend that students:

"a) develop ownership over the process and achieve personally meaningful learning goals; b) learn autonomously through metacognitive, procedural, conceptual, and strategic scaffolding; and c) generate artifacts aimed at authentic audiences beyond the classroom assessment" (p. 707).

Granting this level of agency to students does not necessarily mean surrendering the expertise and authority associated with being an experienced educator. In other words, successful partnerships are built on equity as opposed to equality. Pre-empting sceptics, Cook-Sather *et al* (2014) note several important distinctions when it comes to considering power dynamics within partnerships:

"In student-faculty collaborations, we need to acknowledge that our roles, expertise, responsibilities, and status are different. And they should be. Partnership does not require a false equivalency, but it does mean that the perspectives and contributions made by partners are equally valued and respected and that all participants have an equivalent opportunity to contribute…[S]tudying and designing teaching and learning in partnership with students does not mean that we simply turn the responsibility for conceptualizing curricular and pedagogical approaches over to students, nor does it suggest we should always do everything they recommend to us. Rather, it means that we engage in a more complex set of relationships involving genuine dialogue with students." (p. 7-8)

Noting the importance of team- and trust-building to the success of such partnerships,

Cook-Sather *et al* (2014) write, "Partnerships rarely emerge suddenly in full bloom; instead, they grow and ripen over time as we engage with students" (p. 6). This points to the need to design mechanisms within the cycles and structures of universities that foster and sustain partnerships beyond individual projects. Let us now examine those programs that have achieved sustained success.

3. Established Pedagogical Partnerships

This section reviews two existing programs—one in the United States and one in Sweden—as paradigmatic initiatives in pedagogical partnerships. These widely cited examples have been selected as models from which lessons might be drawn for translation to design contexts. Whilst these are certainly not the only instances of this type of practice, they are two of the most widely cited. In addition to the four examples below, other publications of case studies include Woolmer (2016), Healey *et al* (2014), Little (2012) and Werder & Otis (2010). Further institutional examples for reference are included at the end of this section.

3.1 Students as Learning and Teachers (SaLT) Program, Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges (USA)

https://www.brynmawr.edu/tli/SaLT-Program

The SaLT program, which has been in existence since 2006, is part of the Andrew W. Mellon Teaching and Learning Institute at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges. Cook-Sather (2013), the Institute's director and founder of SaLT, describes the program as students and staff partnering to explore pedagogical practice, which

> "constitutes a form of 'radical collegiality' (Fielding, 1999) through which students are full partners with faculty in analyses and revisions of pedagogical practice" (p. 187).

Undergraduates enrolled at Bryn Mawr or Haverford College apply to become paid consultants and collaborate with staff on projects to improve teaching quality. The process and objectives are set collaboratively by each partnership, but Cook-Sather (2013) provides an example of the type of duties that a student might perform:

> "Each week, the student consultant observes her faculty partner's classroom using a clinical form of observation notes, with columns for time, observations, and reflections. She shares her observation notes with her partner and meets weekly with him or her to discuss what is working well and what might be revised. She might also conduct mid-semester or other forms of feedback gathering and work with her faculty partner to develop or revise various aspects of the course." (p. 188)

This work is then typically formulated as a scholarly output of some kind and disseminated, for instance, through the Institute's own open-access journal *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*, which has published several issues dedicated to student-authored articles (see Volume 1, Issues 21 and 26).

Whilst not all educators are immediately receptive to being observed by student-analysts,

as it puts them in a vulnerable position, partnerships based on empathy, transparency and shared objectives show clear benefits for staff seeking to improve the quality and relevance of their teaching practice. In terms of academic development for teaching staff, Cook-Sather (2013) argues that such a partnership model serves as a "threshold concept" with staff experiencing it as "troublesome, transformative, irreversible, and integrative" (p. 187). Thus, pedagogical partnerships have "the power to transform the way educators understand the teaching and learning process and their role in it" (King & Felten, 2012, p. 5).

The benefits for students also extend beyond merely an improved experience of learning. Engaging in pedagogical partnership has the potential to radically shift ideas of education, prompting an expanded sense of agency. As one student who participated in such projects put it, this kind of work is "good for higher education because it helps disrupt the traditional hierarchy that exists in higher education, and that's good because it helps promote student learning, and that's the goal of higher education" (Abbot, 2013). Another student argues that this kind of work "is the future, or should be the future, of higher education because this sort of collaborative work in being able to create a classroom that is…co-created, co-taught, co-learned is so much more beneficial for students and professors in terms of what works best" (Burke, 2013).

3.2 Active Student Participation, Uppsala University (Sweden)

https://www.uu.se/asp

Under the heading of active student participation (ASP), the University of Uppsala offers a range of modes for students to engage in roles traditionally left to academics:

> "Active student participation imagines learning as a shared venture between educators and students. It invites students to support, empower, and challenge each other's learning, as well as helping them to be co-creators in planning, facilitating, and evaluating courses within higher education" (Barrineau *et al*, 2019).

Generally, the emphasis on ASP is on student-led teaching and peer learning, with most partnerships including some form of course evaluation and/or course design and development. Barrineau and Anderson (2018) describe the 25-year existence of the University's Centre for Environment and Development Studies (CEMUS), which offers student-coordinated course offerings as a model of student-driven education. In this case, students and alumni are hired as employees and granted "an unusual amount of power over decision-making in the design and implementation of interdisciplinary education" (p. 16). In this case, it is a student-initiated partnership; thus, rather than students being invited to participate in a partnership, students invite academics on a term-by-term basis to participate in the course offering. For their part, faculty members tend not to play an active or strong role in course development, delivery or evaluation. To sustain itself from year-to-year, CEMUS has developed a model that does not rely on senior educators for organisational survival. In addition to the student coordinators, a core team of alumni provides "organisational support, continuity, and representation" (p. 3) and sits on the "work group" that includes students,

teachers, and external stakeholders.

While recognising a sense of empowerment, CEMUS coordinators also feel as though they occupy ambiguous and liminal identities within the institution, an ambiguity that they claim offers "the freedom to be experimental and risk failure" (p. 23). Also, with no "expert in charge" of the subject, student enrolled are positioned to adopt more responsibility towards engagement and learning. However, Barrineau and Anderson (2018) warn that, "increased student control of curricula does not necessarily increase the success of partnership" (p. 26). They describe the many challenges continue to face the program, many of which surround relationships and roles of parties involved. As a model of student-driven education, it does however suggest a largely untapped realm for pedagogical innovation.

Three more recently formed programs, each sharing an ethos with those described above, are:

- Teaching and Learning Partnership Projects, University of Queensland (Australia) https://itali.uq.edu.au/about/projects/students-partners
- ChangeMakers Program, University College London (UK) https://www.ucl.ac.uk/changemakers/about-ucl-changemakers
- Student Partners Program, McMaster University (Canada) https://teaching.mcmaster.ca/student-partners-program

4. The potential of pedagogical partnerships in design

In pursuit of translating pedagogical partnerships to design contexts, it is germane to consider the particularities of the latter. Scholars have identified two longstanding challenges facing students in conventional design education contexts: first, the tacit nature of its pedagogical practices and second, an over-reliance on a power imbalance between tutor and novice (see Dutton, 1989; Stevens, 1998; Mewburn, 2011). These are particularly acute in the "dynamic and contested field" of architecture (Webster, 2008: p. 68), as well as its allied, professional, studio-based disciplines, characterised as they are by ritualised practices and hero worshipping (Anthony, 1991; Cuff, 1991; Webster, 2005). Though not a silver bullet, pedagogical partnerships offer an avenue for making some headway in addressing both challenges.

4.1 Design's Tacit Pedagogy

The first challenge, the unspoken quality of design's pedagogical practices, has attracted criticism from scholars and students alike (Yanar, 2007; Willenbrock, 1991). Students from secondary education backgrounds often enter university-level design courses relatively unfamiliar with unstructured modes of learning, and the "culture shock" can be bewildering and frustrating (Thompson, 2019). Generations of studio tutors have preferred to let design learning remain a mysterious enterprise, unwilling or unable to reconcile the subjective nature of design artefacts from the objective demands to deliberate and assess them (Coyne

and Snodgrass, 1991). On the other hand, attempts to directly explain the embodied and experiential nature of design learning can prove insufficient or counterproductive, justifying the use of metaphors like "coach" or "personal trainer" to clarify roles with reference to students' non-academic lives (Adams *et al*, 2016). Particularly in professional design fields like architecture, scholars have also noted the problematic existence of a "hidden curriculum" through which students are socialized into the norms of the profession (see Dutton 1989):

> "Apart from teaching skills and providing knowledge, [architecture schools] provide the social induction that the young architect-to-be must have. Every profession inculcates a value system into its students, although most of these values remain obscured and unsaid...Ways of acting, of talking, of dressing: attitudes, dispositions, and tastes must all be instilled...More than in many other jobs, success in architecture relies less in 'knowing' and more in 'being.'" (Stevens, 1999: p. 55)

In examining "the more tacit, more intricate evolution of an individual through a sequence of distinct periods" of architectural education, Cuff (1991) argues that,

> "Normally, these developmental phases are not described explicitly, even to the novice, but reveal themselves only during the process of becoming" (p. 116).

A further complication, as Yanar (2007) emphasizes, is that whatever pedagogy a given design educator espouses and what teaching approaches they actually practice are often at odds with one another. One value of pedagogical partnerships in this regard would be for more senior students to serve as translators, working to develop tools and activities that make the design process more explicit and critically expose the "hidden curriculum" to incoming cohorts. Although there are ostensibly legitimate reasons that a student might decide not to pursue a career in design after embarking on a design course, unnecessary frustration and anxiety stemming from educators unwilling to elucidate the oddities of design education should not be one of them.

4.2 Design Education's Hierarchical Social Relations

The second key challenge of conventional approaches to design education is its hierarchical social relations. As Mewburn (2011) discusses, the desk crit, the basic unit of social interaction between instructor and student in a design studio, is haunted by the power relations fundamental to this form of role-play "in which the student plays the 'novice architect,' while the teacher takes on various other roles such as 'experienced architect,' 'client' or 'consultant'" (p. 364). Mewburn then points to a key critique of this model published since Schön's seminal work:

> "Within this performance lies always the possibility for replication of the old master/apprentice model which some argue is a powerful way of 'disciplining' undergraduate students into particular professional mores (Cuff, 1991; Webster, 2005 & 2007)." (p. 364).

Despite studio culture's reputation as collaborative, and whilst some pedagogues have experimented with fostering alternative social relations (see Hamilton, 2018), studios remain

in contradiction by and large authoritarian spaces where tutors adopt identities of experts or masters, possessing the disciplinary knowledge and skills that students are in deficit (Ioannou, 2018; Quinlan *et al,* 2007). As Rancière's (1991) story of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* revealed, this myth-based "infantilising" model of education legitimises the authority of the instructor as a way of maintaining wider social relations. To Rancière, this model is indefensible from the standpoint of learning or social justice, serving as an obstacle to the student's emancipation in both realms.

In upending persistent apprenticeship-based power relations, pedagogical partnerships offer a means of extending the collaborative spirit of design and co-creation into pedagogical realms. Although examples exist of design educators and students partnering on short-term pedagogical initiatives, a valuable opportunity remains for establishing sustained partnership models like those outlined in the previous section. Such sustained praxis could build the critical mass and momentum necessary to challenge largely subconscious social relations and socializing forces that have built up over generations of educational practice.

5. Conclusion

The process of building effective pedagogical partnerships must be approached thoughtfully, to be sure. Those who have established successful models of this kind are quick to caution anyone who believes the process will be smooth or easy. On the other hand, the potential benefits are undoubtedly appealing. The more ambitious of these include the complete reimagining of design education and the authentic empowerment of design students. Again, the argument here is that it is not enough for students and staff to engage in design-based co-creation whilst refraining from or resisting partnering on the scholarship of teaching and learning. It is dubious to believe that design students and educators would be able to operate outside pre-existing, hierarchical social relations on design- and/or research-based activities without dedicated space and time for pulling back the curtain on design's pedagogical practices. If real empowerment of students requires that their agency be directed toward active contribution to pedagogical practice, no excuse warrants our failure to even explore how students might achieve greater control over the apparati that inform learning and teaching values, policies and practices.

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