Partnership as an entangled space of becoming: reflections on a collaborative journey

This reflection captures the collaborative journey of two staff members and two former students at a university, beginning in 2019 and continuing through the Covid-19 pandemic. We examine why we engaged in Student-Staff Partnership (SSP) projects, exploring our motivations, evolving understandings of partnership, and the challenges we faced. Despite difficulties, our collaboration being rooted in Freirean principles of hope, transformation, dialogue, and collaboration endured. Our iterative co-creation as partners, students, and staff has been shaped by, shared with, in and through conversations, contexts, and environments. This paper reflects that process, weaving our individual reflections into a cohesive narrative.

About the authors

Jody and Paul began the Foundation Year (FY) at a small university in Birmingham in 2019/20, where Sarah and Anna were lecturers. The FY emphasized critical pedagogy, rooted in Freirean principles of hope, transformation, dialogue, and collaboration. Through dialogic tutor groups, it challenged traditional pedagogical hierarchies and embraced co-created knowledge (Seal and Parkes, 2019).

Our formal collaboration began at the pandemic's start when Sarah recruited students, including Jody and Paul, as peer mentors to develop a student-designed mentoring scheme. Anna joined in 2020/21 to expand this work into a formal SSP project exploring how mentoring could address students' needs during Covid-19. Subsequent projects included an Appreciative Inquiry and a conference presentation at the Forum for Access and Continuing Education in 2022. Despite changes in roles and locations, we continued to meet beyond these activities and reflected on the partnership.

Our approach to this reflection

Reflective practice is essential in teaching, understanding and community relationship-building (Dewey, 1993; Schon, 1991; Seal, 2018), allowing us to explore our varied perspectives while extending the collaborative process itself. Having engaged in SSPs, we convened in June 2024 to further reflect on why our collaboration(s) up until that point had endured. Each of us wrote

reflections focusing on key moments of understanding, particularly Freirean notions of hope, transformation, dialogue, and collaboration (Peters and Mathias, 2018).
Through a reflective workshop, we identified shared and differing insights, which form the foundation of this reflective paper and continue the dialogue that defines and sustains our collaboration.

What brought each of us to the partnership project? Or Why partnership?

The foundations of our collaboration predated the formal SSP project. The FY fostered reciprocal, human-first relationships, where we recognised that all parties bring valuable knowledge and experience to the knowledge production process. Our motivations for SSP involvement were diverse but aligned with Freirean critical pedagogy and the shared values of social justice and equity in higher education. By the time the formal SSP began, we had already been 'doing' partnership together through the FY for some time.

Sarah (Author 3):
I don't really remember it as a conscious decision to engage in SSP work. ...my intrinsic sense that collaborative work is valuable made it unconscionable not to engage in formal project-work. My commitment to SSPs sees these as a vital space(s) for fostering meaningful relationships, which are at the heart of meaningful teaching and/or supporting learning in HE. Moreover, my engagement stems from a belief that these are crucial for understanding and engaging in the micro-politics of educational spaces. They are essential to my practice as an educator.

Paul (Author 1):
My introduction to SSP began in September 2020. Our initial conversations revolved around shared anxieties over homeworking, childcare, and the complexities of blended working in HE. Informal discussions revealed that the challenges we each grappled with could become the core of our partnership project. As a peer mentor for FY students, I noticed that the anxieties they expressed were similar to the ones I was experiencing myself. I was eager to get involved, seeing it as a meaningful opportunity to contribute and address these common concerns collaboratively.

Jody (Author 4):
I met Paul through a mutual friend at university, and although on different programs, we bonded over our roles as FY mentors. Anna, was one of my lecturers, and Sarah, I met during a course-related visit to Oxford University. Both became central figures in my university life. My earliest memories of Sarah, including a visit to Oxford where we discussed the differences that were 'felt' when exploring Newman and Oxford University, opened my eyes to the importance of such educational spaces. Sarah encouraged me to pursue my interests, assuring me that passion would make the journey easier. When she asked me to become a mentor, I agreed, and when the opportunity to join the SSP project came up, I chose to participate, seeing it as a chance

to earn a financial incentive as well as to grow, learn, and connect more deeply with the supportive community at Newman that had helped me rebuild my life.

Anna (Author 2):

I had some prior experience of SSP work, as a staff partner on a previous project. Partnership working resonated strongly with the Freirean approach that underpinned teaching on the FY, and collaboration outside of the classroom seemed a natural next step. I also had personal motivations for joining this partnership. When COVID-19 struck, I felt overwhelmed, navigating a global pandemic whilst balancing the demands of online teaching, a large research project, and homeschooling my young child. Sarah's invitation to join the partnership felt like a hopeful opportunity in an otherwise challenging time. Participating in this partnership offered a sense of purpose, a way to engage meaningfully during this period of isolation

Our understanding of partnership and how this can disrupt traditional university hierarchies

SSPs have been described as spaces for shared learning and democratic engagement (Healey, Healey and West, 2023; Peters and Mathias, 2018). Unlike traditional models of student engagement, partnerships prioritise dialogue, co-creation, and equity (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten, 2014). However, partnerships can be hindered by hierarchical mindsets, resistance to change, and institutional pressures shaped by neoliberal ideologies (Healey, Flint, and Harrington, 2016; Peters and Mathias, 2018). Indeed, we noticed a lack of value/ priority given to partnership working by some colleagues, as well as how others perceived and enacted such partnerships. For example, some colleagues continued to refer to these as *staff-student* partnerships, implying a subtle (but not insignificant!) difference. These views differed from our own understandings of partnership as a space where everyone learns from each other, engaging in co-creation and collaboration without hierarchy. Our SSP work challenged these hierarchies by fostering egalitarian collaboration where all contributions were valued.

Paul (Author 1):

Calling them "Student-Staff Partnership" disrupts traditional hierarchies from the outset. This small shift in language underscored the ethos that no one's perspective was prioritised over another's. Sarah took the lead for ethical approval for our project, but Jody and I were involved in every stage, ensuring a truly collaborative effort. This process wasn't just about compliance; it was a pedagogical moment where we learned by doing, guided by Freirean principles of critical pedagogy. The attitudes within the partnership were grounded in mutual respect, empowerment, and the belief that everyone had something valuable to contribute. Sarah and Anna were not there to direct or control but to support and nurture. This atmosphere of empowerment allowed me to contribute at my pace, and as we worked together, our collaboration deepened.

Jody (Author 4):

I did not feel like I was working with "lecturers," nor did I experience any sense of hierarchy. We were all at Newman, which is a small, socially-minded university, and perhaps because of this or because we were all a similar age, there was no sense of anyone being "above" anyone else. It felt like a natural friendship. In this partnership, there was mutual support and equality, and I never felt like I was working for someone higher than myself, which was an empowering experience.

Anna (Author 2):

When Sarah invited me to join the partnership, it felt like a natural extension of the work we had already been doing on the FY; teaching was understood as a dialogue where both students and staff had valuable knowledge to contribute. Power was shared, not held by staff. Attitudes were open, curious, and mutually supportive; we aimed to tackle challenges together in an egalitarian environment. It was exciting to work in this way in the context of HE which is traditionally more hierarchical.

Sarah (Author 3):

Partnership work highlights tensions within and between hierarchies and is often conceived as something apart from or secondary to formal 'teaching' in workload models. A colleague once revealed to me that their line manager had prioritised other work over involvement in university-supported SSP projects due to resource constraints. Partnership thus, through its emphasis on process and relationships, challenges conventional notions of "productive" time and "important" work, which typically favour visually measurable outcomes over the often intangible but deeply impactful benefits of collaboration.

The evolution of our partnership

Initially focused on addressing students' challenges during Covid-19, the partnership evolved into a deeper inquiry into equity, social justice, and supportive learning environments for all. What started as a way to help students navigate the pandemic grew into a long-term partnership, continuing beyond the original project's goals. The partnership came to be more about the ongoing process of engagement (Healey, Flint, and Harrington, 2016) between the four of us rather than a product or outcome of the initial projects (e.g., the findings or the conference presentations).

Sarah (Author 3)

Over time, I've come to appreciate partnership work as enacting "nomadic praxis" where the 'physical, the symbolic, and the sociological' (Braidotti, 2012, pp.33-34) overlaps. Here, we undo the privileges of some knowledge (s) over others to recognize our perpetual state of becoming, and that SaP requires an openness to multiple perspectives and co-creative experimentation (Fellows et al, *in press*). While the original focus of our SSP may have been to achieve specific project outcomes, it has

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become a way to foster a sense of *distributive agency* where all collaborate, cooperate, or interfere with forces and elements that produce materialities (Bennett, p. 2010, p. 21) and generate creativity.

Paul (Author 1):

The project expanded from being a response to the pandemic to a deeper inquiry into equity, social justice, and how to create more supportive, meaningful learning environments. As we neared the end of our project, it was clear that we weren't finished with what we could give to each other or the project itself. We collectively agreed to take on another project the following year.

Jody (Author 4):

As time went on, I realised the SSP was not just about research but opened doors to further opportunities like presenting at conferences and now writing a paper. It has evolved into something far more significant than I initially anticipated.

Anna (Author 2):

Although the mentoring projects and conferences were the original reasons for, and results of, our partnership work, it is our evolving relationship that has come to signify the partnership to me. As the projects developed and the world around us shifted and changed, so has our relationship. We have grown from student-staff-partners, to co-inquirers, to colleagues, to friends. This has strengthened our desire to explore how we might continue to collaborate creatively in the future.

Challenges to partnership working

Partnerships in higher education face systemic challenges rooted in neoliberal ideologies that prioritize measurable outcomes and efficiency over relational and process-oriented work (e.g. Parkes et al., 2020). These pressures affect both staff and students, with institutional reward systems undervaluing collaborative efforts (Peters and Mathias, 2018). We collectively 'felt' this within our contexts and the partnership, with the value of such work for staff not fully recognised in relation to reward and recognition (Blackwell Young and Parkes, *in press*).

Anna (Author 2):

Partnership work that prioritises dialogue, mutual respect, and personal connection can feel out of place in a university culture which is increasingly shaped by neoliberal values prioritising measurable outcomes and efficiency. Few colleagues engaged in partnership work during my time at Newman – some expressed interested in the concept but felt they didn't have time to explore this with other competing responsibilities in their day-to-day teaching work. Others seemed bemused by the idea or interpreted it as a more hierarchical exercise, coming up with an idea for a project and recruiting student participants. It didn't always feel like there was a common understanding of what SSP working is or the potential value that it holds.

Sarah (Author 3):

Collaborators can experience personal challenges, as Jody and Paul's reflections highlight, but one professional challenge is the lack of recognition for partnership work for staff within institutional reward systems. Without proper support, staff members are forced to prioritise other activities deemed more valuable in workload models. To sustain and promote the intrinsic value of this work, institutions must recognise partnership as central to teaching and learning, providing adequate support, recognition, and space for collaborative endeavours. Reward systems, such as Collaborative Fellowships and/or working towards the Advance HE 'Collaborative Award for Teaching Excellence,' should be expanded to reflect the importance of these initiatives within the framework of institutional promotion, as well as within workload models.

Jody (Author 4):

A challenge was dealing with imposter syndrome, especially transitioning to this new role as 'partner'. I often felt lost and overwhelmed, hoping that things would eventually click as I continued. The partnership provided a supportive environment where I could grow and learn at my own pace.
Another challenge is the disparity in recognition—while students receive a financial incentive, staff often engage out of passion, with little formal acknowledgement. This lack of support can lead to burnout and discourage staff from continuing. To sustain partnership work, it's essential for institutions to recognise and reward both staff and student contributions fairly, ensuring that such collaborative opportunities are valued and supported in the same way as other academic responsibilities.

Paul (Author 1):

One challenge was recognising hidden power dynamics. As the only male in the group, noticing that my female colleagues often apologised when discussing gendered experiences, made me reflect on my own privilege. This learning moment aligned with Bell Hooks' (1994) calling to challenge systems of oppression, even in seemingly egalitarian spaces. Another challenge is that partnership work, which focuses on relationships and mutual respect, often clashes with the neoliberal, outcomes-focused

culture of universities. To sustain and promote this work, universities need to recognise the value of process-oriented, equitable collaboration and create spaces where such work is not only allowed but encouraged. The heart of our work was open, respectful dialogue—continuously rejecting the "banking model" of education where students are passive receivers of knowledge.

We see partnership work as essential because it fosters personal and collective transformation. To sustain and promote its intrinsic value, universities must shift away from transactional models of education to recognise the importance of relationship-building and the transformative potential of partnership work. This reveals the potential that Peters and Mathias (2018, p.63) argue Freirean partnership has to offer, not just for "particular outcomes or improvements in understanding" but towards "a greater understanding of how we can work together to tackle greater challenges."

How micro-moments have sustained and nurtured the collaboration

Over five years, our partnership has been nurtured by "micro-moments" (Gannon et al, 2019) of joy, connection, and mutual support even though Jody and Paul have both graduated, while Anna now works at a different university and Sarah's role at Newman has changed significantly. Like Gannon et al, we did not initially set out to write about joy here. Yet, joy has not just been an enjoyable tangent, but key to sustaining our collaboration and 'is possible in the deliberate that we have come together' (p. 54). This resists the pulls of neo-liberalism through building a sense of belonging, care, connection, mutual support, empowerment, and hope in the spaces in between:

Jody (Author 4):
For me, the partnership created a sense of connection and belonging. It wasn't just about the work; it was about the relationships that were formed. We are like friends who catch up, compare news, share life stories, laugh, support, and encourage each other. It's like our hobby. I felt empowered by the friendship and the academic partnership, which gave me a tie to Newman and helped me rebuild my life after domestic violence. The partnership showed me what I'm capable of, and it gave me a group of people with whom I could have conversations that I might not be able to have in day-to-day life.

Paul (Author 1):
Our Zoom meetings were more than just transactional exchanges of ideas; they were opportunities to build relationships and support one another. Filled with laughter and encouragement, these moments gave me a sense of belonging. Even after returning to campus, those connections grew stronger, fostering creativity and reminding me of the power of authentic partnerships in education.

Anna (Author 2):

Our meetings were often filled with laughter. Even when we got sidetracked or shared personal stories, these moments of connection were vital. As Gannon et al (2019, p.54) remind us, connecting with others can help us reconnect with ourselves, allowing us to 'glimpse alternative fragments of our possible learning, teaching, researching academic selves.' Whilst joy might seem frivolous, it was through these joyful connections that we continued to grow, professionally and personally, as individuals and as a collective.

Sarah (Author 3):

Our seemingly irrelevant micro-moments of tangential conversation have often led to lots of laughter, and deeper connections that have built an informed enthusiasm for making change. Dismissing these tangents would undermine the essence of co-creation, as they generate spaces for genuine collaboration. Such moments of joy and connection often go unnoticed when working within hierarchical or neoliberal structures that prioritise outcomes over process. It is in these micro-moments that the real work of partnership occurs, fostering hope through collective engagement and relational entanglement.

What have our entangled reflections taught us?

Our reflections highlight how partnership transcends hierarchical roles though our becoming with, in and through the co-created processes of learning and doing. Unlike traditional student-teacher dynamics, this space fosters reciprocal relationships where individuals connect as humans first, creating a shared sense of purpose and belonging. Our view then is that partnership should not be seen as an additional or secondary task but as integral to teaching and learning. It is an entangled space of becoming—where students, staff, and partners emerge through iterative interactions shaped by conversations, contexts, and experiences (Taylor, 2017). Our collaboration reveals the transformative potential of Freirean partnership, not only for achieving specific outcomes but for fostering collective efforts to address broader challenges. True partnership values process over product, emphasizing mutual respect, dialogue, and hope.

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