

REFLECTIVE ESSAY

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

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This essay reflects on our collaborative journey from 2019 through and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. We examine our motivations for engaging in student-staff partnership (SSP) projects and our evolving understandings of the joy and hope that collaborations can bring alongside the challenges we faced and/or observed. We are two former students and two staff members who met at Birmingham Newman University, a small English university underpinned by Catholic values of social justice, personal development, and the common good (Birmingham Newman University, 2020). Many students here commute, are mature, disabled, from low-participation neighbourhoods, and/or first-generation entrants (Birmingham Newman University, 2025).

We met on the institutional Integrated Foundation Year (FY) on which Jody and Paul began studying 2019/20 and where Sarah and Anna were lecturers. In England, a foundation year is typically a preparatory year of study at the beginning of a higher education (HE) course (Department for Education [DfE], 2023). These are often “integrated” into the subject-specific degree at the start of studies. Our FY emphasised critical pedagogy rooted in Freirean principles of hope, transformation, dialogue, and collaboration (Seal & Parkes, 2019).

Our formal collaboration began at the pandemic’s start when Sarah recruited students, including Jody and Paul, as FY student-student peer mentors to develop a student-designed mentoring scheme. Anna joined in 2020/21 to expand this into a formal SSP project addressing students’ needs during COVID-19. The collaboration involved regular meetings to develop the mentoring scheme specific to student need generated by COVID, which evolved into a deeper inquiry into equity, social justice, and supportive learning environments. The partnership fostered reciprocal relationships, disrupted traditional hierarchies, and resulted in subsequent work, including a research event based around appreciative inquiry (a collaborative and strengths-based process of inquiry) (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005) and a conference presentation at the Forum for Access and Continuing Education in 2022. Despite challenges, our collaboration thrived on moments of joy, connection, and mutual support, highlighting the transformative potential of Freirean partnership.

Reflective practice is essential in teaching, understanding, and community relationship-building (Dewey, 1993; Schon, 1991; Seal, 2018). Having engaged in SSPs, we convened in June 2024 to reflect on why our collaboration(s) had endured. Prior to this, each of us wrote short

500-word reflections focusing on key moments of understanding, particularly Freirean notions of hope, transformation, dialogue, and collaboration (Peters & Mathias, 2018). During a workshop, we read each other's reflections, identifying, sharing, and discussing where our insights diverged but also coalesced. These insights were grouped into the following themes:

- Why each of us was drawn to the partnership project
- Our understanding of partnerships and how this can disrupt traditional university hierarchies
- The evolution of our partnership
- Challenges to partnership working
- How micro-moments of joy and hope have sustained and nurtured the collaboration
- What our entangled reflections have taught us

Our post-workshop reflections on these themes are rearticulated here and form the basis of this article to continue the dialogue that defines our collaboration.

ENGAGING IN STUDENT-STAFF PARTNERSHIPS: PERSONAL REFLECTIONS AND SHARED VALUES

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

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 it. My commitment to SSPs sees these as vital spaces for fostering meaningful relationships, which are at the heart of meaningful teaching and supporting learning in HE. Moreover, my engagement stems from a belief that these are crucial for understanding my participation in the micro-politics of educational spaces. They are essential to my practice as an educator.

Paul

Our initial conversations revolved around shared anxieties regarding homeworking, childcare, and the complexities of blended working in HE. Informal discussions revealed that our challenges could become the core of our partnership project. As a peer mentor for FY students, I noticed that the anxieties they expressed were like those I was experiencing myself. I was eager to get involved, seeing it as a valuable opportunity to collaborate on addressing these shared concerns.

Jody

Meeting Paul through a mutual friend at university, we bonded over our roles as FY mentors. Anna was one of my lecturers, and I met Sarah during a course-related visit to Oxford University. Both became central figures in my university life. On the Oxford trip, we discussed the differences that were felt in diverse 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 arose, I chose to participate.

It was a chance to earn some money as well as to grow, learn, and connect more deeply with the supportive community at the university that had helped me rebuild my life.

Anna

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 and a way to engage meaningfully during this period of isolation.

STUDENT-STAFF PARTNERSHIPS AS DEMOCRATIC PRAXIS

Students-as-partners (SaP) work provides space for shared learning and democratic engagement (Healey et al., 2023; Peters & Mathias, 2018). Unlike traditional models of student engagement, partnerships prioritise dialogue, co-creation, and equity (Cook-Sather et al., 2014). However, we noticed a lack of value or 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 significant hierarchical difference. Our SSP work challenged these hierarchies by fostering egalitarian collaboration where all contributions were valued.

Paul

Calling them "student-staff partnerships" disrupts traditional hierarchies from the outset. This small shift in language underscored the ethos that no one's perspective was prioritised over another's, echoing Cook-Sather et al. (2014). Though Sarah led our ethics application, Jody and I were involved in every stage, ensuring a 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 sense of value, mutual respect, and empowerment that the SSP embodied stemmed from our earlier FY relationships where we shared past educational experiences (see Parkes et al., 2018). The SSP then was already founded on a horizontal structure, disrupting the notion of "the lecturer" and forming a "pedagogic self" where "dialogical encounters" helped us acquire "a new (academic) literacy to name past and current experiences" (Harris et al, 2016, p. 363). 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

I agree with Paul; I did not feel like I was working with "lecturers," nor did I experience any sense of hierarchy. We were all at 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.

Anna

Joining the partnership 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

Our collaborations highlight tensions within hierarchies where partnership work is often conceived as 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-sponsored SSP projects due to resource constraints. Felten and Lambert's (2020) argument that institutions should recognise and reward efforts that foster strong relationships chimes here. Partnerships, through their emphasis on process and relationships, challenge conventional notions of "productive" time and "important" work, which typically favour visually measurable outcomes over the often intangible but deeply impactful benefits of collaboration.

AN ITERATIVE ENDEAVOUR OF EQUITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Initially focused on addressing students' challenges during COVID-19, the partnership evolved to be more about the ongoing process of engagement (Healey et al., 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

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) overlap. Here, we undo the privileges of some knowledge(s) over others to recognise our perpetual state of becoming, and that SaP requires an openness to multiple perspectives and co-creative experimentation (Fellows et al., 2025). It has 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), generating creativity through sharing and sometimes challenging or changing our ideas.

Paul

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

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

Anna

It is our evolving relationship that has come to signify the partnership to me. As the projects unfolded 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.

NAVIGATING THE NEOLIBERAL IN HIGHER EDUCATION PARTNERSHIPS

Partnerships in higher education face systemic challenges rooted in neoliberal ideologies that perpetuate narratives of the student-as-consumer and favour measurable outcomes over relational work. Such pressures undervalue collaborative efforts (Peters & Mathias, 2018) across and within all institutional domains that writers such as Liz Thomas (2012) tell us are vital to student success. Freire (1968; 2013), hooks (1994), Collini (2012), Zepke (2018), and Seal (2021) continue to support us in a conception of HE as a transformational experience concerned with the development of critical thinking, self-awareness, and exposure to diverse perspectives rather than as a financial transaction. Recognising partnership work as essential for personal and collective transformation, we argue that universities must shift from transactional models to emphasise relationship-building and the transformative potential of partnership.

Anna

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 the university. Some expressed interest 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. Whilst it sometimes felt frustrating that colleagues did not recognise the value of such work, it also strengthened my resolve to keep doing it. Having experienced the richness of co-creation both inside and outside the classroom, I cannot imagine not working in this way. Like Peters and Mathias (2018), I will continue exploring creative collaboration as a small act of rebellion against the neoliberal values shaping institutional priorities.

Sarah

Collaborators can experience personal challenges, as Jody's and Paul's reflections highlight. 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

There are challenges: dealing with imposter syndrome is one, especially when 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. There is also 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.

Paul

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. The focus on relationships and mutual respect for effective partnerships 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 (Freire, 1968), where students are passive receivers of knowledge.

SUSTAINING PARTNERSHIP THROUGH JOY AND CONNECTION

Over 5 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, Anna now works at a different university, and Sarah’s role at the university has changed significantly. Like Gannon et al. (2019), 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 way 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 as a sort of “distributive” (Bennett, 2010, p. 21) or “relational” (Barad, 2007, p. 178) agency with, in, and through the collaborative endeavour.

Jody

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 the university 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

Our 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

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) remind us, these moments of connection are fundamental, and connecting with others can help us reconnect with ourselves, allowing us to “glimpse alternative fragments of our possible learning, teaching, researching academic selves” (p. 54). 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

Our seemingly irrelevant micro-moments of tangential conversation have often led to laughter, building a deeper connection and enthusiasm for making change. Dismissing these tangents would undermine the essence of co-creation. 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.

BEYOND HIERARCHICAL ROLES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Our reflections highlight how partnership transcends hierarchical roles through 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 learning and teaching. It is an entangled space of becoming where we as individuals are not agents solely in control of our own understandings and actions within the university. Rather, we as 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, emphasising mutual respect, dialogue, and hope.

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