

The 'Partnership Identity' in Higher Education: Moving From 'Us' and 'Them' to 'We' in Student-Staff Partnership

Lucy Mercer-Mapstone, *University of Queensland*, l.mercermapstone@uq.edu.au

Elizabeth Marquis, *McMaster University*, beth.marquis@mcmaster.ca

Catherine McConnell, *University of Brighton*, C.McConnell@brighton.ac.uk

Abstract

Student-staff partnerships in higher education re-frame the ways that students and staff work together as active collaborators in teaching and learning. Such a radical re-visioning of the relationships between students, staff, and the institutions within which they function is both potentially transformational and a significant challenge given the deeply entrenched identities, and attached norms, that form a part of institutional culture. Explicit examination of how identity formation and navigation influences, and is influenced by, student-staff partnership is an important but under-explored area in the partnership literature. Drawing on structured reflective narratives focused on our own partnership experiences, we employ collaborative autoethnographic methods to explore the nexus of partnership and identity through a social identity lens. Results highlight the need to move away from the labelling of dichotomous student/staff roles and identities in the context of partnership to a more nuanced conception that embraces the multiplicity of identity and diverse dimensions of meaning. We highlight the power of the normative conceptions that we attach to different identities, particularly where dissonance arises should those norms conflict. We discuss how this dissonance was particularly salient for us as we crossed the partnership threshold, only to find that the ethos underlying our new partnership identities contradicted the traditional hierarchical structure of the institutions within which we continued to function. Finally, we propose the existence of a 'partnership identity' as providing a space where partners might move away from distinctions between group identities of 'us' and 'them' to a shared space of 'we' as partners and colleagues.

Keywords: students as partners, partnership, autoethnography, social identity

Introduction

Student-staff partnership approaches ('partnership') are positioned as one area for enhancing student engagement in higher education (HE). Partnership re-frames the ways students and staff, including academic/faculty and professional, work together as active collaborators in teaching and learning (Dunne & Zandstra, 2011; Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014; Flint, 2016). We understand partnership as engagement activities among students and others in higher education that are founded on an ethos and practice of mutual respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014). Partnership 'positions both students and faculty as learners as well as teachers' (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014, p. 7) in a way that brings students

behind the scenes of higher education (Matthews, 2016) – an area typically reserved for staff. Such a radical revision of the relationships between students, staff, and the institutions within which they function, is both potentially transformational (Healey et al., 2014) and a significant challenge given its subversion of ‘traditional’ hierarchies.

Higher education presents a diverse set of traditions, boundaries, and strong historical expectations and connotations. Each individual functioning within that context takes up certain ‘roles’ which might be thought of as enacting a particular performance based on expected behaviours (Cook-Sather, 2001). For example, the role of ‘academics’ as the creators and teachers of knowledge is historically entrenched, as is the role of ‘students’ as passive receivers or learners of knowledge (hooks, 1994). Student-staff partnership is a movement that challenges that model by defying such unidirectional relationships between students and staff – reconceptualising them as co-creators and co-learners of knowledge (Bovill, Cook-Sather, & Felten, 2011; Cook-Sather et al., 2014).

Tensions are bound to arise in such situations where both personal and institutional change is required and norms – both of individual or institutional roles – are challenged (Bovill, Cook-Sather, Felten, Millard, & Moore-Cherry, 2016; Healey et al., 2014). The paradox exists then that, while partnership aims to overcome the power hierarchies that create distance between students and staff, partnerships have also been found to reinforce those accentuated differences between partners – particularly when it comes to labelling who is ‘student’ and who is ‘staff’ (Mercer-Mapstone, Dvorakova, Groenendijk, & Matthews, 2017). This re-negotiation of well-ingrained hierarchies may mean that those involved face challenges to equally well-ingrained identities. Such challenges are potentially confronting or uncomfortable experiences as well as an opportunity for transformation.

While some analyses of partnership delve into the ways that partners’ identities influence and are influenced by partnership (e.g. Cook-Sather, 2015), scholarship has yet to address fully how the complexities of identity — the multiple roles partners play and the various ways they define themselves — are both experienced by partners and shape the partnerships themselves.

Identity, Roles, and Partnership

The roles that we fulfil – in our jobs, in partnership, in our faculty or discipline, or within the institution – are intrinsically linked to our identity. Burke and Reitzes (1981), describe one’s role as enacting, or intending to enact, expected behaviours or ‘performances’ based on conceptions of identity. Research shows that role performance is intrinsically linked to identity through “dimensions of meaning” (Burke & Reitzes, 1981). That is, the expectation for and enactment of behaviours within certain roles occurs in alignment with what we believe it means to ‘be’ a certain identity or not to ‘be’ different counter-identities – for example, what it means to ‘be’ a student. We conceptualise ‘role’, then, as a construct which is informed by, and results from, notions of identity. Our understanding of this relationship is heavily informed by Cook-Sather (2001)

The fact that it is common in the twenty-first century for both students and staff to split their time between multiple roles in higher education adds a further layer of complexity – and presents a new set of challenges and opportunities for both the dynamic process of identity formation and the implications of such identity conceptions for partnership. Cook-Sather and Luz (2015), for example, point out that participating in student-staff partnership can cause shifts in students' sense of themselves, and of their roles and responsibilities in the university. Cook-Sather and Luz (2015) position these shifts as especially significant for students from under-represented groups. Delving into the depth and nuance of what it means to 'be a partner' on top, or as a part, of those pre-existing roles and identities has the potential to offer insight into navigating the challenges and learning opportunities of student-staff partnerships.

Social Identity as a Theoretical Framework

Identity has been understood and investigated in many ways in higher education including exploration of, for example, institutional identity (e.g. White, Roberts, Rees, & Read, 2014), professional identity (e.g. Paterson, Higgs, Wilcox, & Villeneuve, 2002), doctoral student professional identity (e.g. Sweitzer, 2009), and academic identity (e.g. Ducharme, 1993). Social identity theory (SIT) offers a mechanism for considering all of these particular identities and is thus an encompassing lens through which to explore identity in partnership.

SIT can be used to explain social behaviour and perceptions based on our social identities. An important part of our positive self-concept is derived from our social identity – the knowledge that we belong to various social groups. We attach value, and emotional and evaluative significance to this sense of group membership (Tajfel, 1972). SIT argues that one of the predominant ways in which we strive for that positive self-concept is by social competition – making distinctions between 'us' (ingroups – to which we ascribe a sense of belonging) and 'them' (outgroups – to which we do not belong).

These distinctions change how people perceive and relate to each other such that we tend to enhance similarities with, and give preference to, our own social ingroup(s) while also emphasising differences between us and outgroups (Hornsey, 2008; Tajfel, 1974). This differentiation between 'us and them' in the context of higher education resonates in the historical context of both actual and perceived differences and boundaries being constructed between students and staff. SIT holds that the way we perceive differences between, and interact with, ingroups and outgroups is driven by the normative behaviours, values, or expectations ('norms') that we perceive to be attached to each social group (Hornsey, 2008; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Such norms likely have implications for the relational aspects of partnership, particularly in regard to perceived group distinctions between 'students' and 'staff'.

Strong identification with certain social groups can result in the development of stereotypes (Turner & Giles, 1981). Relying on stereotyped perceptions of outgroups can result in the application of stereotypes or stigmatisations to outgroup members. We

could, for example, extend this lens to the higher education phenomenon of staff referring to ‘the student body’ and ‘the student experience’ – labels which have homogenising and stereotypical implications, potentially causing feelings of marginalisation. It is through this social identity lens that we explore our own experiences of partnership.

Methods

By reflecting on student-staff partnership through a social identity lens, we aim to tease apart some of the complexities of partnership particularly for those of us who work in partnership while belonging to multiple ‘university role’ social groups – including, but not limited to – both ‘students’ and ‘staff’. We have used the following research questions to guide our exploration:

1. How does social identity influence the navigation of different student-staff partnerships?
2. How does engaging in student-staff partnership affect identity formation and navigation of those partnerships?
3. Where dissonance arises, what approaches can be used to overcome or harness that dissonance to allow a functioning partnership to develop?

Who we are

We are a team of three women in three universities, across three countries, working in partnership to reflect on our own student-staff partnership practices in a collaborative environment. We have taken a deeply reflective approach to this research and as such feel it is important to provide some background and insight into who we are in order to contextualise our personal identities, experiences, and reflections.

Lucy Mercer-Mapstone is a PhD candidate from a research-intensive, Australian university. Her disciplinary background is in science communication. Lucy works in partnership with staff and other students at the central teaching and learning unit. She has roles as ‘PhD student’, ‘lecturer and tutor’ and ‘research staff’ within her university.

Beth Marquis is a tenure-track Assistant Professor at a research-intensive university in Canada. Her disciplinary training is in film and cultural studies. She teaches into an interdisciplinary Arts & Science program and is Associate Director (Research) at the central teaching and learning institute. She oversees a ‘Student Partners Program’ (see Marquis et al., 2016) and partners extensively with students.

Catherine McConnell is a Senior Lecturer at a post-1992 university in England. Her teaching background is across art and design. She currently works at the university’s Centre for Learning and Teaching. Alongside this, Catherine conducts research with students into the impact of partnership opportunities on retention and success, and is an Education Doctorate student focusing on student-staff partnership.

Collaborative Autoethnography

We set out to investigate our experiences of partnership through a social identity lens using qualitative ‘collaborative autoethnographic’ methods. The relationship between the auto as in ‘self’, ethnos as in ‘culture’, and graphy as in ‘research process’ referred to by Reed-Danahay (1997) implies ‘self-study’ – situating the researcher as participant. Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez (2013) advance the case for ‘collaborative autoethnography’: presenting the possibility that the method can simultaneously be collaborative, autobiographical, and ethnographic – involving

‘a group of researchers pooling their stories to find some commonalities and differences ... to discover the meanings of the stories in relation to their sociocultural contexts’ (Chang et al., 2013, p. 17).

As three practitioners working in the area of partnership in higher education across three western countries, in differing roles, and in significantly different institutional contexts, we believed there would be both personal and broader benefit in us exploring our multiple identities in partnership. The kind of reflective narratives that we have utilised are typical of the autoethnography field, and a common method for investigating student-staff partnership (for example, see also Becker, Kennedy, Shahverdi, & Spence, 2015; Seale, Gibson, Haynes, & Potter, 2015)

The reflection process

We each wrote reflective narratives guided by a structured reflective framework. Such narratives focus on the experiential and scholars argue that they are therefore appropriate for examining the experiences of smaller groups of people – and more specifically, for exploring identity formation in new environments (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, 1995; Fitzmaurice, 2013). Common features across reflective models include: structured thinking that prompts a descriptive account; moving through emotions; an evaluation or analysis of what has happened; a consideration of what has been learnt; and a formulation of plans for what could be done differently in future (e.g. Borton, 1970; Colton & Sparks-Langer, 1993; Rolfe, Jasper, & Freshwater, 2011)

In order to design a robust framework to guide our individual reflections, we adapted a Critical Incident Analysis framework from the University of Brighton (2011). Such facilitative tools are designed to promote learning through the reflection on, and analysis of, a particular experience. Our revised reflective framework (shown in Table 1) was intended to structure our individual reflections by posing cues and specific questions focused on identity construction, navigation, and enactment, in the context of student-staff partnerships. Ethics clearance for this study was provided by each of the three institutions involved.

Table 1. Cues and questions used to guide personal narratives focussing on identity construction, navigation and enactment in the context of student-staff partnerships

Description of experience	Phenomenon: describe in detail your partnership practice, or a specific partnership experience that seems especially noteworthy, without interpretation or judgement
	Context: what were the significant background factors to this experience? Why did it take place, and what was its purpose?
Reflection	What were you trying to achieve?
	Why did you behave as you did?
	What were the consequences of your actions for yourself and others?
	How did you feel about the experience when it was happening?
	To what extent did your actions realize your understanding of partnership?
	What identity(s) were you consciously aware of <u>at the time</u> ?
	What identity(s) do you believe were at play during this interaction in hindsight?
Analysis: Influencing factors	If multiple, which identity was most salient? How were they interacting?
	What factors influenced your decision-making? Some potential options to consider: Prior experiences, Societal expectations/ideologies/assumptions, Context
	How was your salient identity affecting your actions?
	How was the interaction between identities affecting your actions?
Analysis: Alternatives	How was the presence of this identity(s) influencing your perceptions of those with whom you were interacting?
	What other choices did you have?
Learning & Action	What could be the consequences of these choices?
	How do you feel about this experience now?
	Has this experience changed your way of understanding yourself?
	Did your salient identity change? If so, how and why?
	In hindsight, how has this interaction/event affected your ongoing identity in future partnerships
	What new questions, challenges or issues has it raised?
	Given the chance, what would you do differently next time?
How will you follow up on this experience in order to put your learning into practice?	

Analysis

Our reflective narratives were analysed using constant comparison analysis (Merriam, 2009). While constant comparison was initially developed as a component of grounded theory research, Merriam (2009) points out that it has been used widely in qualitative research outside of grounded theory due to its inductive and comparative nature. These features, alongside this history of widespread use, likewise made it an appropriate approach for analysing our data. We began by open coding individually, two of us

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reading one narrative and highlighting points that resonated with our research questions. We then independently collapsed our preliminary codes into larger themes, and compared and discussed. One researcher then drafted a combined code tree that considered our independent coding and applied this structure to the analysis of other reflections, making adjustments and modifications as necessary. For those reflections, the process involved a mixture of induction (looking to the data to see where new themes arose) and deduction (applying the preliminary code tree). The resulting code structure was then scrutinized and discussed by all team members, and coding was cross-checked for agreement.

Results

Analysis of our reflections revealed three important themes:

1. the need for more nuanced and complex conceptions of identity that go beyond the dichotomous 'student/staff' binary;
2. the impact of dissonance for individuals at the interface of perceived norms of the institutional context and values of partnership, or between identities for those with multiple roles in the university; and
3. the strategies employed to navigate and overcome those dissonances.

These themes are expanded on below, and explored in depth in the discussion.

A strong theme across our reflections highlighted the need for nuanced, multiple conceptions of identity. Catherine and Lucy emphasized that they occupy a range of roles within the university, troubling the simplistic dichotomy between staff and student in the process. Beth also signalled a sense of belonging to multiple social ingroups within the university, describing herself as a 'faculty member with responsibilities to both our university's teaching and learning institute and an academic program.' Finally, each of us highlighted that we consider partnership to be a central focus of our academic research and practice, positioning this as a strong element of our academic identities, which may distinguish us from others occupying similar roles.

Our reflections also began to suggest the complex ways in which these multiple, overlapping identities might impinge upon and affect partnership work. This was described as creating a sense of dissonance or uncertainty in situations that do not seem designed to acknowledge the multiplicity of identity. Lucy described her experience in a partnership where the contextual framing strongly highlighted her role as student in a way that she felt reduced and oversimplified her identity in ways that were not common to her typical experiences of partnership:

In my own mind, seeing myself so strongly labelled as 'student' meant I felt the marginalization of my staff identity.

Beth described an uncomfortable authorship discussion with two student partners, suggesting that such conversations often bring 'apparently contradictory elements of [her] academic identity into play':

On one hand, I define myself as someone who values student partnership, and have frequently argued that students should receive authorship credit commensurate with their contributions. On the other, as a pre-tenure faculty member, the very real demands of my career progress mean that I have to produce first-authored publications.'

Again, dissonance appears to arise as the values and norms attached to Beth's partnership identity begin to clash with the perceived norms of her professional identity. This clash shapes partnership practice, as Beth described "navigat[ing] this tension in a way [she] can live with by ensuring that [her] contributions clearly warrant first author status wherever possible." While this practice ensures ethical authorship credit while allowing Beth to meet career requirements, it also potentially discourages full partnership in research. In cases like the discussion described in the current reflection, wherein "a strong case could be made for any of the three [partners] as first author," Beth noted suggesting a student author be listed first (the authorship order ultimately selected), but also indicated this meant a potential need to produce further publications of her own in order to secure the scholarly identity required of her position.

Catherine articulated a sense of dissonance between competing identities in describing challenges experienced as a staff member undertaking doctoral study:

Because of my hybrid identity (staff-student), I am often unclear on the identity I should take when in supervisory meetings. [...] [T]he development and co-existence of student identity alongside that of staff member is an incredible challenge.

Another particularly salient theme focused on the felt power of existing norms and stereotypes. In different but related ways, each of us described what we saw as dominant norms of our multiple ingroups, and indicated ways in which stereotypical perceptions shaped our understandings and behaviours within partnership contexts. Both Lucy and Catherine described perceived norms attached to being a student. Both reflected on how these felt norms (regardless of how widely they are held in practice) influenced their behaviour.

Dissonance arose where, when the student identity was salient, those attached norms conflicted with the norms and values of their staff identities. Catherine noted that part of the dissonance she experiences in her doctoral journey is related to her own assumption of 'traditional' student behaviour:

When I take on 'student', I become somewhat more passive in my behaviour, taking notes, listening intently, agreeing with points made as I am trying to keep up with the information being imparted. This immediately conflicts with my staff identity, and causes me frustration and upset, that the more I take on the passive student role, the more it fuels the expert-novice relationship.

Similarly, Lucy noted that the norms she attached to her notion of 'traditional' student identity had seeped in to her own thinking about herself as a student and thereby shaped her reactions in partnership:

...my student identity – and the ‘lower’ status I felt internally in that context – made me much more aware of power differentials in a way that I never had been before. I believe this was based on those well-ingrained traditional views of the ‘role of a student’ within the higher education institution, where the traditional hierarchy is so widely imposed, which appear to have remained latent in my mind – despite the majority of my recent experience saying otherwise.

For her part, Beth engaged with the felt role expectation that faculty members are to command a sense of authority, respect, and expertise, and noted the ways in which normative conceptions of her gender and age impinge on that authority and simultaneously affect partnership work:

As a comparatively junior faculty member, and a woman, I’m conscious of the fact that existing power relations mean I don’t necessarily evoke the same respect as do my more experienced colleagues or my male counterparts. The familiarity with which I’m often treated by students is in many ways congruent with the non-hierarchical approach I hope to take to teaching and helps to facilitate the development of partnerships with students. Nevertheless, I’ve also been cautioned by colleagues about the dangers of being underestimated as a result of age and gender, and sometimes find myself wondering how such concerns influence – and are influenced by – my partnership practice.

The final theme arising from our narratives addressed the ways in which we each navigate dissonance. Lucy and Beth each articulated the value of open communication about identity-related tensions, for instance, describing experiences wherein we broached—or intended to broach—potentially uncomfortable discussions and work(ed) through them with our partners. We also noted the importance of negotiation and compromise in such communications.

Our reflections also discussed occasions on which we strategically foregrounded one aspect of our identity over others, noting that this might help to reduce dissonance, but could also contribute problematically to reproducing simplistic understandings of student and staff identities.

I am more keenly aware that in some situations, making outwardly explicit my role as being either a student or a staff can be beneficial. This reminds me that, while I function within the ethos of partnership in those capacities where I have a choice to do so, the broader institutional context generally does not – and those traditional roles and hierarchies in higher education are well ingrained and often hard to change, break down, or challenge. (Lucy)

The actual process of reflecting on the partnership process through an identity lens was framed as an especially productive option for navigating dissonance and promoting growth:

My understanding of partnership has shifted because of this reflection. I have realised that behaviours, interpersonal relations, and previous experiences play a significant role in partnership and that I had underestimated this previously. Perhaps the most vulnerable partnership moments are those when assumed identities

become overly 'normalised'? Working against the typified student behaviours is challenging me, yet I am fortunate to have the metacognitive awareness and ability to address my actions, which is a major advantage of my staff identity. (Catherine)

I have been able to better negotiate student-staff partnerships by being explicitly aware of the 'traditional' norms (those that do not align with my partnership ethos) attached to my identities and to not let them be pervasive in my beliefs or actions. (Lucy)

Discussion

Conception and Intersection of Multiple Identities

Our reflections suggest the need for more nuanced and complex conceptions of identity that go beyond the dichotomous 'student/staff' binary. Churchman (2006) argues the need to go beyond simplistic views of a single academic identity – that the academic role is one of dynamism and compromise. This multiplicity and complexity of identity, as we have found here, tends to run against the grain of the traditional higher education institution where the driving focus increasingly is on uniformity to enhance institutional cohesion (Churchman & King, 2009). The need to extend beyond binaries in partnership is also discussed in previous work where authors argue that such binarization has the potential to marginalise individuals, and reinforce stereotypes or power hierarchies (Mercer-Mapstone & Mercer, 2017). Our results also highlight the fragility of identities in different partnership contexts. Lucy's identity, for example, based on a history of strong collaboration with her partner, was shaken by a single event in a context that was dissimilar from her home institution. Such instances have the potential to undermine long-term relationships, and impact both the development and functioning of partnerships and individuals within their roles, should resolutions not be found. Cook-Sather (2001, p. 124) explores the need for nuance in such contexts: "the goal is not for participants to assume clearly defined and separate roles but rather to re-imagine generative ways to co-construct knowledge." This view aligns with the ethos of partnership in aiming to break down barriers by blurring lines between roles.

Our reflections strongly emphasised and valued this notion of partnership as a defining way of being within our roles in different institutional contexts. This was an interesting emergence and tended to be framed as a juxtaposition between what we considered to be a 'traditional academic identity' and a 'partnership identity'. This partnership identity seemed to provide a space where partners could move away from distinctions between group identities of 'us' and 'them' to a shared space of 'we' as partners. This shift to a shared identity seems to enact the notion of radical collegiality (Fielding, 1999) by attempting to step outside the binarized student/staff roles of traditional higher education. As our experiences of dissonance suggest, however, 'living' this partnership identity was not always easy in practice, as the norms of our co-present, more traditional identities continued to operate and shape our actions and interactions.

Billot (2010) contends that the development of an academic identity is linked strongly to the past and to the historical context of higher education institutions. Attached to this historical conception of the academy are notions of a university as a community of scholars, which Billot (2010) argues come with attached norms of power, elitism, and exclusion (Harris, 2005). This ‘traditional’ top-down culture seems to align with the conceptions we mutually expressed were deeply rooted in our notions of what it means to function in higher education (as either student and/or staff). For each of us, this sense of tradition contested with our newer, perhaps more liberal, sense of a partnership identity. The power of these perceived institutional norms will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

Billot (2010) raises similar tensions in the context of professional versus academic identity clashes as the organisational culture of higher education rapidly changes. Such change results in a shift in expectations for academics to ‘do more’ and the author argues that, under the ‘new’ institutional conditions, those values of elitism attached to the traditional academic identity are continually being challenged. This trend seems to be akin to our notion of a partnership ethos challenging the same traditional values at both the personal and institutional levels.

It is interesting to note that, in our reflections, this dissonance between the traditional approach to learning and collaborating in higher education and the partnership approach seems to transcend specific roles – supporting our argument for the presence of the partnership identity being an important superordinate identity. The clash between the two conceptions resulted in challenging the norms and values of both identities regardless of which roles we fulfilled. The implications of these nuanced distinctions become more prevalent in the following section where we discuss the normative conceptions of those identities and the resulting implications for functioning within partnership and the institution.

Normative Conceptions and Dissonance of Identity and Roles

Through our narratives, the challenges of feeling a strong sense of belonging to multiple social groups and thus having social identities which are often seen as distinct or in tension comes to the fore. Part of this tension comes from the normative conceptions attached to the identities that drive our expectations for each of these roles that we variously inhabit.

Lucy and Catherine, for example, each highlighted a strong dissonance between the perceived norms for being a student under the previously discussed ‘traditional academic identity’, and the less-traditional ethos and beliefs associated with a ‘partnership identity’; again, highlighting the potential fragility of identity. This phenomenon has been previously discussed in higher education, being described as the notion that “players in such an academic scene tend to have clearly delineated impressions of what is theirs to speak to or act upon in relation to others” (Cook-Sather, 2001, p. 137). A particularly troubling aspect of these limiting expectations for certain roles (Cook-Sather, 2001) is the perception that those roles are “ascribed different

degrees of power” that “affect interactions and people’s sense of themselves” in higher education (Cook-Sather, 2001, p. 123), as was certainly the case our context.

More than simply making clear that we regularly navigate multiple roles and identities in partnership, then, our reflections demonstrate the considerable influence of the norms we attach to these identities and how those norms drive the enactment of our roles within partnership practices. These findings reflect similar tensions raised by Healey et al. (2014, p. 56): ‘[Partnership] raises challenges to existing assumptions and norms about working and learning in higher education, and offers possibilities for thinking and acting differently by embracing the challenges as problems to grapple with and learn from.’ Even while we attempt to transcend traditional boundaries and hierarchies, such stereotypes and norms continue to shape our expectations, behaviours, and dimensions of meaning in relation to others in complex (and often pernicious) ways.

In alignment with our findings, Billot (2010) contends that conflict – or in our case, dissonance – arises when individual values clash with the institutional normative expectations. In that sense, clearly defined roles which are perhaps a necessity in the current institutional context are stifling in terms of both potential and actual interactions (Cook-Sather, 2001).

Perhaps we, through our reflections, are collectively experiencing a crossing of the partnership threshold. Partnership has previously been described as a threshold concept in higher education for both students and staff (Cook-Sather, 2014; Cook-Sather & Luz, 2015). Crossing that threshold can be ‘initially ‘troublesome’, given the norms in higher education that clearly distinguish faculty and student roles and responsibilities’; however ‘once embraced, the notion of such student-faculty partnership is transformative, irreversible, and integrative’ (Cook-Sather, 2014, p. 187). Our results tend to agree with this process of moving from troubling to transformational. We are, potentially, in the liminal stage in between those two states.

The power of norms attached to each of our identities raises important considerations for functioning within partnership that merit further exploration. The way members of different social groups interact relies strongly on the norms of any given salient social identity (Hornsey, 2008; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Partnership is fundamentally a way to re-envision the relational aspects between students and staff thus making those identity-based interactions of utmost importance.

Navigating Dissonance

A recent, systematic literature review on student-staff partnership in higher education problematizes the finding that the reporting of partnership practices focuses far more often on positive aspects or outcomes of partnership with a distinct lack of consideration of the challenges and means to overcome them (Mercer-Mapstone et al. 2017). Our reflections raised identity-related challenges that we each had faced in our partnership practices and generated strategies we deploy when attempting to navigate the identity-related dissonances we have experienced working in partnership.

Honest communication was at the forefront of these strategies that we engaged to address the conflict that seemed to arise from our internal dissonances. Conflict in partnership tends to be an under-discussed topic in the academic literature. However, making space for communication that addresses conflict in partnership can lead to stronger more resilient relationships in the long run (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017).

This need for dialogue as a method of addressing difficulties in identity formation in higher education has been highlighted elsewhere. Fitzmaurice (2013) argues that dialogue focussing on values and practice, rather than output and regulations, is central in the context of new academic identity formation. Authors contend that such dialogue is integral for new academic staff to grow both professionally and personally. Open and honest dialogue, particularly across differences in identity, is also central to sustainable student-staff partnerships (Cook-Sather, 2015).

One slightly troublesome and uncomfortable strategy that we found we employed to overcome identity dissonance was to ‘play’ on different identities in different contexts by making one identity more outwardly explicit in a context where we perceived that identity to be more beneficial. For example, those of us who claim both student and staff identities might express a student identity with other students to understand their genuine experience, but perhaps express a staff identity when it will give us credibility or access to staff networks. This process aligns with social identity theory where our various identities become more salient as we deem appropriate in a given context – that is, we express an identity in a bid to ‘fit in’. However, the underlying assumptions behind this process in partnership are troubling – raising questions around whether, even in partnership, our perceptions of equity between students and staff are not as equal as perhaps we espouse, again underlining the power of traditional norms.

Our results also indicated that the process of reflecting – individually and collaboratively – was a valuable approach to navigating identity-related dissonance. The value of reflection in higher education has been explored previously. Reiman and Thies-Sprinthall (1998) advocate for reflective practice based on the notion that failure to reflect may result in missed opportunities to develop as both a person and as a teacher. The value of reflection in navigating dissonance or conflict has also been explored in the context of student-staff partnership previously, although not extensively through an identity lens. Mercer-Mapstone et al. (2017, p. 8) discuss the co-learning benefits of reflecting in partnership on a shared experience:

We feel that [reflection] led to a deeper understanding of one another – and of our shared experiences of partnership. This has developed our partnership relationships in a way that allows more space for functional conflict and for having those ‘hard conversations’ when we face challenges in our future partnership practices.

The approach of collaborative autoethnography as used by Mercer-Mapstone et al. (2017) and in our context has revealed not only insights into the sociocultural phenomenon of partnership practice, but also provided an avenue for dealing with dissonance at the relational level for those engaging in partnership together. Should reflection be used as one approach to overcoming identity dissonance in partnership, it

will be important to stay mindful of the notion of praxis – the need to embed and embody that self-learning into one’s own practice so as to continue to reflect on, acknowledge, and consider the inherent dynamism of identities in the context of partnership.

This shift from experiencing difficulty to shedding light on a way forward has been one of the many aspects of learning that has been elucidated as we collaboratively forged a ‘brave space’ for reflection and partnership. Brave, rather than safe, spaces are those in which risky, painful or uncomfortable experiences are embraced and supported rather than avoided as arenas for learning and development (Arao & Clemens, 2013). In a recent collection of reflective essays on student-staff partnership, ‘participants experienced and created brave spaces—spaces in which they felt courageous enough to risk, explore, experiment, assert, learn, and change, knowing that they would be supported in those necessarily destabilizing and unpredictable processes’ (Cook-Sather, 2016, p. 1). This resonates with us in our current reflective endeavour. As we made ourselves vulnerable and exposed ourselves to often confronting truths through the balancing act of navigating multiple, fragile identities, we also felt supported by each other and our partnership – creating a brave space within which we could grow.

Conclusion

Our findings draw on experiences from three partnership practitioners in varied countries, contexts, and institutions. While we caution against making generalisations from this small in-depth study, when our results are considered in the context of the broader literature they give rise to implications for engaging in student-staff partnership in higher education that are worthy of further study. Firstly, the complexity of identity in partnership contexts cannot be underestimated. We emphasise the need to move away from dichotomous labels of ‘student’ and ‘staff’ as there are risks associated with causing dissonance, stereotyping and marginalisation as a result of such oversimplification.

Secondly, being engaged in partnership can have a transformative influence on identity formation within the higher education environment for students and staff. We highlight the emerging juxtaposition of ‘traditional academic identity’ – with attached norms associated with the historically-entrenched, top-down culture of the academy — and ‘partnership identity’ – with norms that reflect the ethos of partnership as a collaborative teaching and learning endeavour. These two identities caused tensions as values seemed to conflict, causing dissonance. The partnership identity, however, offered the potential of transcending specific roles within the university, suggesting the importance of partnership in breaking down the boundaries between students and staff and creating new ways of being in the academy. These new ways of being are simultaneously exciting and difficult, and would benefit from further scholarly exploration.

Thirdly, acknowledging and grappling with identity issues individually and collaboratively is integral to the sustainability of partnership as a practice and ethos. Dissonance can be a disruptive experience when an individual’s sense of multiple identities causes

conflict between the norms attached to those self-conceptions. We emphasise that this dissonance can also be a significant learning opportunity. We highlight two ways in which partnership practitioners might navigate dissonance individually and together: making space for open and honest dialogue with one's self and one's partners; and explicit consideration, examination, and analysis of how and why the norms attached to dissonant identities affect one's behaviour and influence relationships through individual and collaborative reflection.

Our reflections give rise to avenues for future inquiry. Research could usefully tease apart the complexities of navigating multiple identities within partnership in more diverse contexts and roles within higher education such as for underrepresented groups who may also have strong cultural identities at play, or for partnership practitioners outside of the typical western focus of partnership research. Beth's preliminary reflections about the ways in which age and gender shape her partnership practices point to these ideas being worthy of future exploration. There is also value in examining further how the norms we attach to our own roles influence how we interact and build relationships within student-staff partnerships. Finally, uncovering other mechanisms for dealing with dissonance in partnership would be beneficial for future partnership research and practice.

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