Higher Education Academy

TRANSFORMING TEACHING
INSPIRING LEARNING

A guide to ethics and student engagement through partnership

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In partnership with: Sheffield Hallam University

Contents

1. Student partnership, engagement and ethics

Recently, Healey, Flint and Harrington (2014) mapped the territory of students as partners, drawing on work in UK and international higher education. Much of the partnership work captured in their mapping is emergent, instantiated in a diverse array of practices, and links individual, context and institution in a range of complex ways at micro, meso and macro levels and scales. The conceptual model they develop focuses on four distinct but interrelated and overlapping strands of engaging students as partners:

> Learning, teaching and assessment
> Subject-based research and inquiry
> Curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy
> Scholarship of teaching and learning.

These four strands are generated either from engaging students as partners in learning, teaching and research, or in quality enhancement of learning and teaching policy and practice.

At the centre of their model, and unifying the four strands, is the concept of 'partnership learning communities' (Healey, Flint and Harrington 2014, p. 26). This concept is philosophically and theoretically underpinned by democratic conceptions of learning and experience (Dewey 1916), dialogic practice (Freire, 1986), the mutuality of learning in subject and professional communities (Tinto 2003; Barr et al. 2005) and interdisciplinarity (Love 2012). Partnership learning communities are considered to foster values which enable productive forms of being, becoming and belonging through sustained engagement in shared learning activities. Essentially, partnership is 'a process of working and learning, and an ethos that fosters this process, rather than a specific outcome' (Healey, Flint and Harrington 2014, p. 55). It is here – in its vision of engagement through partnership as a relational, social and communitarian enterprise rooted in shared values and a commitment to learning as reciprocity and participation – that the model most explicitly invokes ethical impulses. In an associated report, Framework for student engagement through partnership, nine values are identified as underpinning partnership (HEA 2015). These values are: authenticity, honesty, inclusivity, reciprocity, empowerment, trust, courage, plurality, and responsibility. The values provide a link between ethical considerations concerning partnership (its meaning, worth and purpose) and

practical matters (about how to make this particular partnership happen to achieve these ends in this situation), and give rise to questions such as:

> How to develop partnerships that all involved are committed to and feel worth investing in?
> How to negotiate the boundaries of partnership in relation to who is involved, how, why and what each individual contributes?
> How to ensure all do actually benefit in partnership practices?
> How to create a safe and supportive space to challenge prevailing practices that hinder partnership developments?
> How to play to the strengths of each party in the partnership in order to create a productive space for diversity and difference to flourish?

It is important to note that partnership learning communities may contain tensions arising from issues of power, differences in equality of opportunity for engagement and participation, and diversity in experience and perspectives that each party brings with them. Participants' educational histories and learning biographies mean that individuals engaged in partnership will interpret and enact the values and principles on which partnership communities are founded in complex and often differing ways. Power, (in)equalities and difference are entangled with identities, learning and teaching relations, and individual motivation, and will influence the scope, tenor and 'feel' of partnership as it is put into practice. All of this makes engagement through partnership a messy, complex, contested and contestable practice. However, the opportunities opened by partnership – including new ways of working with students, new modes of learning, and the transformation of self, relations with others and organisational context – are profound. Ethical tensions which do arise may, therefore, be considered productively, not as a problem but as a prompt to deeper reflexivity and learning.

Taking ethics into account in partnership is about working out how to make partnership values and principles work in practice. You may want to consider:
> How much work can be done at the start to establish the values on which your partnership project runs?
> Do the nine HEA values cover all the values you want your partnership project to include?

2. Partnership as ethos not outcome

The values and principles of partnership

Engagement through partnership is a fundamentally relational process. It is oriented to ethos not outcome. As such, there is a need to consider which ethical approaches may best inform partnership as a practice.

Why take ethics into account in engagement through partnership work? Sayer (2011) points out that our relation to the world and to others is one of concern. Partnership is a matter of concern to those involved because it is both an enactment of engagement to which concerns of reciprocity and relationality are key, and its efforts are directed towards enhancing learning and teaching practices in ways which will be mutually beneficial. The focus of engagement through partnership is on process not outcome, in much the same way that Sayer notes: 'we are emergent products of specific social relations, in which we continue to act, reproducing or transforming those relations in the process' (Sayer 2011, p. 119). Considering the ethical

dimension of engagement through partnership, then, is as much about focusing on what matters and what concerns us as about what 'works'.

Partnership practices are situated within the push and pull of the general and the specific:

> The general is aligned with broader values and principles, such as those identified in the Framework for partnership in learning and teaching in higher education; and Healey, Flint and Harrington (2014) emphasise that engagement through partnership is a process imbued with an ethos, and aligned to values, even if those values often remain implicit rather than explicit.
> The specific is concerned with the enactment of partnership in practice; and each partnership practice or process is a unique instantiation of particular social relations embodying a commitment to bringing about positive change in learning relations.

Partnership is both a collective and individual process and it is often in the gap between the individual and the collective that problems arise. Putting ethics into action is about negotiating ways of surfacing and resolving tensions between the collective and the individual in relation the general – what is good for the partnership community as a whole – and particular – what is ethically beneficial in terms of a particular party's engagement in partnership.

In resolving tensions around these issues you may want to consider:

> How will you work together to align individual and collective commitments within your partnership project?
> What practical procedures need to be put in place to ensure tensions and differences that arise can be adequately articulated, aired and resolved?

Considering engagement through partnership as the scene for ethical relations brings up the question of what ethical frameworks are needed.

3. Developing an ethical framework for partnership

This section outlines four frameworks for considering ethics and student engagement through partnership. The frameworks are explained and situated in relation to Taylor and Robinson's (2014) distinction between general moral principles which govern behaviour and which may be legal or normative, and ethics which concerns how moral principles are put into action within social systems. Clearly, it is ethics in action which are most germane to partnership. As indicated earlier, one key value of partnership is that all may potentially gain. Partnership ethics, therefore, are situated at the intersecting point of two major ways of thinking about ethics: deontological and consequentialist ethical frameworks.

Deontological ethics

This framework is also known as the 'ethics of principles'. It derives from the Enlightenment thinking of Immanuel Kant and proposes that the basis of our existence as rational and autonomous beings is founded in moral laws which are universal, general and unconditional. Such laws, according to Kant, are equitable: they apply to all and ought to be applied irrespective of individual or circumstances. It is this articulation of ethics that leads to codes and procedures for ethics and Institutional Ethics Review Boards which regulate research ethics. A relevant code for some forms of partnership work is Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA 2011) which is framed around an 'ethic of respect' for The Person, Knowledge,

Democratic Values, the Quality of Education Research, and Academic Freedom. Such codes have universal applicability, and cover ethical principles and procedures surrounding informed consent, right to withdraw vulnerable persons, disclosure, anonymity and confidentiality.

Consequentialist ethics

Also known as the 'utilitarian ethics of consequences', consequentialist ethics originate in the thinking of Jeremy Bentham and focus on the effects of actions. Consequentialist ethics maintain that taking consequences into account is the best route to ensuring the greatest well-being for the greatest number. This form of ethics encourages consideration of the beneficence of particular actions, and their potential impacts on others in context. The importance of consequentialist ethics is that they can put deontological ethics to the test. They do this by surfacing questions about how to square universal principles and values with the specificity of individuals, situations and contexts. Partnership practices happen in specific places with particular people who wish to achieve specific ends. They are, by their very nature, located in institutional ways of doing that bring cultural constraints as well as opportunities. All of these factors mean that engagement through partnership requires attention to consequentialist ethics. Matters of concern in partnership practices – particularly those to do with the unequal distribution of power, or inequality in opportunity for participation – therefore emerge as the ground for ethical struggles. The ethics of partnership may also be put under the spotlight in instances where it is perceived that learning gains from partnership are unequally distributed.

Deontological ethics are about having procedures which apply to all whereas consequentialist ethics are about the ethics of particular situations. Together, these two ways of thinking about ethics raise some questions for partnership, including:

> What does it mean in practice to say that all those participate in partnership should benefit from doing so?
> What procedures can be put in place to ensure this happens?
> What do you do if benefits differ for different parties?
> Are those differences just or equitable?
> How do local circumstances influence what can be done in partnership?
> Once the partnership is underway how do you ensure that the principles enshrined at the start don't get ignored?

In recent years, other ethical frameworks have been proposed.

Relational ethics

Carolyn Ellis (2007) proposes relational ethics as a means to recognise and value mutuality, respect for the other, and the promotion of non-exploitative ways of working. In partnership, relational ethics would be about acting with our hearts and minds in order to develop forms of respectful connectedness based on interpersonal bonds, and would be a means to encourage all involved to take responsibility for the consequences of their words and action. Relational ethics can be traced back to the work of the philosopher Martin Buber. Buber (1937) was interested in finding a way to conceptualise relationships of non-instrumentality, and he developed the dyad of the 'I-Thou' as a means of thinking about ways of relating to another that were rooted in being present to the other, directness, responsibility and dialogue. He opposed the relational reciprocity of the I-Thou – which he saw as the basis of an ethic of relation – with the I-It relation. The I-It relation turns people into things who we then can use

for our own ends. Working together to establish I-Thou relations speaks to the values of reciprocity, trust and authenticity which are suggested to be at the heart of partnership.

At the same time, relationality is not easy: because partnership is not an achieved state, but a continuing and reflexive struggle to establish and maintain community through mutual care and responsibility, it requires effort, time and ongoing commitment. Relational ethics appears to be a useful ethical approach for student engagement through partnership because it requires continuing vigilance to situations, persons and their relations but it, too, gives rise to questions:

> What if there are 'bad vibes' between parties which seem to get in the way of working – how can relational ethics help?
> Reflecting deeply on how we relate to others may surface fears about our own capabilities, or about our unspoken prejudices. How can relational ethics help us work through this?

An ethics of care

Emphasis on interpersonal connections is also a central feature of an 'ethics of care' which was developed by feminist researchers as a means to get away from whether we 'ought' to act in accordance with deontological or consequentialist ethics, and to foreground how ethical choices are often bound up with issues of power. Nel Noddings (2012, p. 232) says that an ethic of care is about caring as a foundation for ethical choices. An ethics of care encourages us to focus on 'the root of our responsibility to one another' in order to ensure that action and interaction are guided by 'mutual and spontaneous regard.' Noddings' point resonates with the values Dewey (1916) thought central to a communitarian democracy, such as dialogue, openness and collaboration, values which also inform partnership practices. Carol Gilligan's (1982) work attends to the micropolitical practices of voice and power which raise profound ethical issues around how partnership practices are shaped, by whom, for what purposes, and to what ends. Questions about whose voices are included, who is silenced, and how we might open up partnership processes to hear, include and tend to those silences, are deeply ethical issues. Gilligan highlights the importance of making space to hear expressions of feeling, emotion and affect. It is possible that considering partnership practices through an ethics of care lens might also help unpack some of the neo-liberal and rationalist assumptions that constitute contemporary student and staff institutional identities.

However, putting an ethics of care into practice is not straightforward: Noddings warns that there are no 'recipes' for care. Enacting an ethic of care in partnership means tuning into the fact that different manifestations of care are required in different circumstances which means we cannot – and should not – treat all people equally. Moreover, all participants are active givers and recipients in a caring exchange and, while this may not displace power hierarchies altogether, it may encourage us to notice the ways power ebbs, flows and circulates within the process of putting partnership into practice. At the least, an ethics of care contests the assumption that empowerment is a one-way process. Some questions to consider when considering an ethic of care in partnership would be:

> How to value all voices?
> How to enable conditions so that all voices may be heard?
> How to develop good listening skills?

4. Ethics-in-action in engagement through partnership

This guide envisages engagement through partnership as a relational, social and communitarian enterprise rooted in shared values and a commitment to learning as reciprocity and participation. As such, partnership is a process which instantiates its principles in practice; brings its values to life in their dynamic enactment; and produces unique instances of contextual partnership-in-action. It is a process which promises new ways of working and learning, and holds the potential for transformation of self in relation with others, with gains for all involved, including the institution. These factors lend partnership an ethical dimension.

However, a 'one size fits all' approach to ethics is unsuitable given the specificity, diversity and potential for positive dissensus in partnership working. The notion of dissensus comes from Ranciere (2010) who argues the need to rethink what is meant by 'politics'. Dissensus is not simply about being able to express a conflict of interest but is about the excluded and included coming together such that new ideas and new ways of being become possible. Dissensus, when considered in the context of creating an ethical 'political' space to broaden and deepen partnership practices, would seem to be a useful concept.

Integrating ethical considerations into partnership processes provides an opportunity space for taking differences in ways of being, belonging and becoming into account, and for considering how power and inequality inform partnership enactments. Partnership working suggests the importance of adaptability and creativity. In this respect, a bricolage approach to ethics might be most useful, whereby elements from different ethical approaches are built into partnership arrangements, which are then subject to continuing review. The questions included in the guide above, and the tools which follow, are designed to support practical ways of thinking through some of the ethical issues partnership practices give rise to, while the ethics frameworks signal where some possible ethical solutions may be found. The ethical approach offered is grounded in process ethics (Swim, St George and Wulff 2001) which pays due attention to values of open-endedness, connectedness and ongoing responsibility for self and other, and which also entail being attentive to 'ethically important moments' (Guillemin and Gillam 2004).

5. Using the ethics guide and the diagnostic tools

The guide is not intended to be prescriptive but, rather, to open up some ways of thinking about the ethical implications of engaging student as partners. It is to be used in conjunction with the two diagnostic tools which follow. Teaching staff and partnership practitioners can use the guide and tools in various ways:

> To promote the reflexive consideration of ethical approaches to partnership;
> To facilitate discussion amongst parties regarding how ethics can be more fully integrated into the design of partnership activities; and
> To diagnose where ethical issues may have led to occasions where partnership working has had only mixed success.

7. Ethics-in-action: tools and templates

Diagnostic Tool 1: Narrative Vignettes and Template

Aim

Use the Narratives Vignette prompt and Template below to map the ethical dilemmas raised at each stage of the Partnership and Course Design situation for the respective individuals.

Objectives

1. To illuminate the ethics of partnership from the perspectives and experiences of different individuals involved;
2. To break down a complex partnership situation into a number of smaller ethical moments as a practical means of thinking through ethics-in-action;
3. To facilitate reflection on the ethical relations between context, individual and partnership processes;
4. To support understanding of how to apply the ethical frameworks in this guide to the analysis of ethical dilemmas;
5. To enable parties to develop good decision-making on ethics-in-action in their own partnership projects;
6. To prompt discussion of how the values identified in Framework for student engagement through partnership (HEA, 2015), and in Engagement through partnership (Healey, Flint and Harrington, 2014), can be put into action in partnership practice.

Tasks

The exercise involves three tasks.

Task 1

Write a Narrative Vignette for each party involved in the partnership situation.

Task 2

Complete the Narratives Template to map the ethical dilemmas raised at each stage of the partnership process for each individual.

Task 3

Use the nine values outlined in the Framework for partnership in learning and teaching in higher education – authenticity, honesty, inclusivity, reciprocity, empowerment, trust, courage, plurality, and responsibility – to evaluate this partnership situation.

Partnership situation

Partnership and Course Design

The Department of Social Sciences at a large university is moving to a new teaching model. While reduced resource allocation is a factor, the change is also driven by pedagogic research which indicates the learning gains that accrue when students learn through investigation, imagination and inquiry. These principles are to be embedded in course design for each course that comes up for revalidation in the next three years. The Department has been successful in bidding for two student partnership interns (Katie and Mala) to work with course teams to remodel their courses during revalidation. Four large undergraduate courses are to be revalidated in the current academic year. The Head of Department, in consultation with the programme managers' group, has assigned Katie to BA (Hons) Education Studies and Mala to BA (Hons) Psychology. The interns are located within the university's partnership team and have had two days induction covering course design principles, hearing about good practice in partnership working, and meeting the course leaders of their allocated course teams. Their brief is to work with the team staff for the equivalent of one day a week from October to April on how to integrate the new teaching model most effectively into course redesign through the revalidation process.

The course leader Katie is working with expresses strong interest in the new teaching model and in partnership principles. Katie is given a desk to use in the course team leader's office; she has been invited to attend weekly course meetings; and the course leader has worked with her to design her partnership brief as an action research project, involving a survey with current second year students about their teaching and learning, interviews with key staff, and shadowing the course leader to quality assessment meetings for course revalidation. Katie has been tasked with recruiting a sample of students to act as partners/ respondents to put the project into action. Results from the project will underpin course redesign and Katie has been asked to write a short report on the project for the validation panel.

Mala has been allocated a hotdesk with associate lecturers which occasionally means she has nowhere to sit. The course leader has asked her to allocate Friday as her day for the partnership work. Initial discussions with the course team indicate that some are sceptical about the new teaching model. The course leader is an advocate of staff-student partnerships. Mala did a presentation on her partnership brief at a staff meeting, and many of the team invited her to come and talk to the students in their classes. The course leader has given Mala freedom about how she obtains information to support the curriculum re-design process. She has decided to focus on one module and has asked the staff and course reps from that module onto a working group to redesign it to integrate the three principles of investigation, imagination and inquiry. Her idea is that this could be used as an example for the redesign of other modules.

Task 1: Narrative Vignettes

Using the Partnership Situation, each party in the partnership team chooses one of the following roles and audio records (2 minute) or writes a short (200 words) partnership statement on the theme of 'My view of partnership is …' from their perspective:

> The Head of Department;
> Course Leader BA (Hons) Education Studies;
> Course Leader BSc (Hons) Psychology;
> Katie;
> Mala;
> Partnership Induction Coordinator;
> A member of lecturing staff from each of the course teams;
> Course rep.

Vignettes are shared amongst the partnership group. The discussion following this may wish to focus on:

> The identification of different presumptions about partnership;
> The influence of institutional constraints e.g. time, space and resources, on enacting partnership;
> How decisions about partnership link to roles, hierarchies and institutional structures;
> Training for partnership;
> Partnership initiatives and team working;
> Partnership and belonging;
> The value and purpose of this particular initiative.

Task 2: Narrative Template

Following on from the Vignettes, and using the Partnership Situation above, each party then completes the following template for one of the partnership team roles. This may be the same role as in Task 1 or parties may swap roles.

What did they do in practice to facilitate partnership?	What values underpin these decisions and actions?	What ethical dilemmas are raised?	What would you have done?	What are the implications for partnership working?

Task 3: Reflection on values and ethics to evaluate the partnership situation

Use the nine values outlined in the Framework for student engagement through partnership – **authenticity**, **honesty**, **inclusivity**, **reciprocity**, **empowerment**, **trust**, **courage**, **plurality**, and **responsibility** – to evaluate this partnership situation.

In addition, you may want to consider the following issues:

> How can partnership working be supported at departmental and course team level?
> How many people can practically be involved in partnership?
> What should/can be done about those not involved?
> Should there be incentives for students to get involved in partnership work?
> Should all members of a class be invited to be involved?
> What can be done to embed good partnership practice in team cultures?

Diagnostic Tool 2: Scenario Planning for Ethical Futures

Aim

Scenario planning involves the telling of multiple stories that cover a variety of plausible futures. A partnership situation is provided. This is to be used to construct three possible ethical futures: an optimistic future, a pessimistic future and the most likely future.

Objectives

1. To bring ethical issues to the fore though discussions of possible partnership scenarios;
2. To offer a practical way of thinking through some of the ethical issues partnership practices may give rise to;
3. To enable parties to relate ethics-in-action to ethical frameworks found in this guide;
4. To prompt discussion of how the values identified in Framework for student engagement through partnership (HEA, 2015), and in Engagement through partnership (Healey, Flint and Harrington, 2014) can be put into action in partnership practice.

Tasks

The exercise involves three tasks.

Task 1

Identify the ethical issues in the given partnership situation.

Task 2

Develop three possible ethical futures detailing the ethical dilemmas that are raised in each.

Task 3

Use the nine values outlined in the Framework for student engagement through partnership – authenticity, honesty, inclusivity, reciprocity, empowerment, trust, courage, plurality, and responsibility – to evaluate this partnership situation.

Partnership situation

Partnership and Peer Mentoring

The School of Health at the University of Summerton has introduced a 'Peer Partnership Programme' following a pilot on one course which indicated significant benefits in retention and achievement of individual-to-group partnership mentoring. The Peer Partnership Programme (PPP) has a School Champion who has led mentoring advice sessions for programme managers and course leaders. The PPP is advertised in March, there is a selection process organised by the School Champion, and second and third year mentors are recruited to support new first year undergraduates. The programme commences in November. The mentors are allocated on the basis of course and discipline, although there is not always a neat fit. Mentors receive appropriate training, they provide pastoral and academic support, and they normally mentor groups of up to six students. At the end of the mentoring term they achieve a mentoring recognition award.

The PPP is based on a partnership approach which means that the aim is to develop the group mentoring sessions as a learning community where belonging and self-expression are highly prized. In practice, this should mean that the goals of mentoring are mutually negotiated between the mentor and group of mentees, that group sessions run on the basis of open discussion and confidentiality, and that all members of the group feel they can be respected for their opinions.

Course leaders act as the institutional interface between the mentoring Champion and the individual mentors. The BSc in Health and Social Care has been allocated two mentors. This is a large course with 60 students, the majority female and mature, with many living off campus. The mentors are both 23. One is a third year Medical student who had a gap year and the other is in the third year of her Nursing degree and worked for two years to save money to support herself through university. The course leader has discussed the general mentoring needs of BSc Health and Social Care cohorts with both mentors and indicated that while they are enthusiastic and committed, they lack academic skills such as critical thinking and writing, the older ones sometimes dominate in groups, and the younger ones have poor time-management skills. She has offered to select the mentees for the mentors based on her judgement of their 'ability' after the first written assessment in October.

Task 1: Identify the ethical issues

Break the partnership situation down as follows to identify some of the key ethical issues:

Question	Brief note on ethical issue that arises from the question	Map the issue against the nine HEA partner principles
Who participates?		
Who decides who participates?		
What motivates participation?		
What gets done in the group mentoring?		
Who decides?		
How to include all mentoring group members?		
How can differences within the mentoring group be dealt with?		
Whose responsibility is it to deal with problems?		
How often should the group meet?		
Who decides?		
Where should they meet?		
How can the success of the mentoring be decided? By whom?		

Task 2: Three ethical futures

Possible future 1: An optimistic future

Possible future 2: A pessimistic future

Possible future 3: The most likely future

Task 3: Reflection on three possible futures: questions for discussion

Use the nine values outlined in the *Framework for student engagement through partnership* – **authenticity**, **honesty**, **inclusivity**, **reciprocity**, **empowerment**, **trust**, **courage**, **plurality**, and **responsibility** – to evaluate this partnership situation.

In addition, you may want to consider the following issues:

> What are the values that ought to underpin peer mentoring learning communities?
> How can these best be put into practice?
> How can a 'safe' group feel for partnership activity be generated?
> What if mentors are motivated by adding things into their CV rather than the generosity that usually motivates peer mentoring processes?
> Should mentees always be self-selecting? If not, on what basis should mentees be selected? And by whom?
> Should mentees get rewards for their work?
> What if tensions and irresolvable differences arise in peer group mentoring?
> How should a programme like the PPP be evaluated?

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