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Doing 'students as partners' is not enough: The role of theory in our partnership practices

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Engaging university students as partners (SaP) in learning and teaching is gaining momentum across the higher education sector (Matthews, Cook-Sather, & Healey, 2018) and is considered good practice in SoTL (Felten, 2013). While contested, SaP creates space for us to imagine students and staff (includes academics/faculty and administrative staff) working together in egalitarian learning communities to realise the goals of higher education contributing to a more caring and just world (Cook-Sather & Felten, 2017; Kreber, 2013; Matthews et al, 2018). As enthusiasm grows along with concerns, there are increasing calls for theory to guide SaP practices (Peters, 2016; Seale et al., 2015). A recent student-staff collaborative project researched the theories evoked in SaP scholarship (Matthews et al., 2019). Elaborating on that research and the growing literature on SaP, I ponder 'a theory of SaP' by drawing on Hammersley's (2012) classifications on the meaning of theory and expanding Trowler's (2012) notion of theory in *the imaginarium*. Ultimately, I argue that SaP should be considered a theory in relation to practice—theory that is comprised of principles and values to guide the relational praxis of partnership that is always shaped by power dynamics, and with historical commitments to social justice and democratic ideals. Thinking about SaP as a theory of partnership praxis offers greater agency for practitioners and advocates that moves us collectively toward genuine praxis—practice and reflection in constant dialogue that transforms the realities of those involved (Freire, 1996)—where students and staff work together for a more just and caring world. If you are working in partnership, researching SaP, or interested in the literature, come along and join the conversation to further our practices and deepen our thinking about learning and teaching partnership.

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