

# The Power of Partnership

Students, Staff, and Faculty  
Revolutionizing Higher Education

---

Edited by Lucy Mercer-Mapstone and Sophia Abbot



Elon University Center for Engaged Learning  
Elon, North Carolina  
[www.CenterforEngagedLearning.org](http://www.CenterforEngagedLearning.org)

©2020 by Lucy Mercer-Mapstone and Sophia Abbot. This work is made available under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) license.

Series editors: Jessie L. Moore and Peter Felten  
Copyeditor and designer: Jennie Goforth  
Graphic illustrator: Sam Hester

### **Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Mercer-Mapstone, Lucy | Abbot, Sophia

Title: The Power of Partnership: Students, Staff, and Faculty Revolutionizing Higher Education / Lucy Mercer-Mapstone and Sophia Abbot

Description: Elon, North Carolina : Elon University Center for Engaged Learning, [2020] | Series: Center for engaged learning open access book series | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019956342 | ISBN (PDF) 978-1-951414-02-3 | ISBN (pbk.) 978-1-951414-03-0 | DOI <https://doi.org/10.36284/celelon.0a2>

Subjects: LCSH: Teacher-student relationships | College teaching

## CHAPTER 5

# Partnership as a Civic Process

**Isabella Lenihan-Ikin**

*Undergraduate student*

Victoria University of Wellington  
Aotearoa New Zealand

**Brad Olsen**

*Undergraduate student*

Victoria University of Wellington  
Aotearoa New Zealand

**Kathryn A. Sutherland**

*Associate professor*

Victoria University of Wellington  
Aotearoa New Zealand

**Emma Tennent**

*PhD student*

Victoria University of Wellington  
Aotearoa New Zealand

**Marc Wilson**

*Professor*

Victoria University of Wellington  
Aotearoa New Zealand

In a challenge to the “students as consumers” discourse, a team of students and academics at Victoria University of Wellington in Aotearoa New Zealand set out to investigate and demonstrate the potential of partnership as a civic process in research and in teaching. We were thrust together as a group of (mostly) strangers through a Change Institute experience in May 2017. Despite all odds (not knowing each other, different disciplinary backgrounds, different ages and stages of life, and no experience with “students as partners”), we became a cohesive team who examined civic engagement initiatives in curricula at our university. We conducted interviews; we developed case studies, resources, and even a new staff-student partnership program for the wider university; and

we made recommendations for encouraging change across the institution. In this chapter, we offer a poetic summary of our project's research findings, and we treat the university as a civic realm and community with its own intrinsic power dynamics. We reflect on how our project challenged, unravelled, and got caught up in those power relations. We offer some celebrations of and warnings about growing partnerships in curricula and in research.

### **What Does “Civic” Mean in New Zealand?**

New Zealand universities have a legally mandated role to be the “critic and conscience of society” (Education Act 1989, 162.4). Our universities work “interactively in, with and for society” (Brown et al. 2016, 648). Universities raise awareness about social issues, advise on and help create policy, conduct and share research that influences decision-making bodies and changes lives, and help students develop their ability to become (more) educated, engaged, and active citizens (see Wood and Mulligan 2016) and critical members of society. Universities are proponents for, partners in, and sites of civic engagement.

Many conceptions of civic engagement position “the university” as outside, critiquing, and/or working alongside “the community” (see Marullo and Edwards 2000). At one extreme, these asymmetrical relationships are based on a novice-to-expert paradigm, while others are more equal partnerships with reciprocal learning at their core (Brown et al. 2016). A capacious view of civic engagement also recognizes the civic identity of the university community itself. For example, Victoria University of Wellington is based in New Zealand's capital city and defines itself as a “global civic university” with the aim of “enriching national culture, civil society and global citizenship” clearly spelled out in our Strategic Plan (Victoria University of Wellington 2014). Many of our degrees, qualifications, courses, and extracurricular programs have been developed to help students and staff achieve this goal. Victoria is one of the city's largest employers, with more than 2,200 staff and over 22,000 students. An organization of this size is arguably a civic space in and of itself, as well as an organization that has a responsibility to speak truth to the power of the capital city and the nation (Boland 2014). We sought

not only to investigate how best to encourage university-community partnerships through civically engaged curricula but also to challenge our own conceptions of and engagement with the university itself as a civic space.

## **Our Project**

Our provost selected a team in early 2017 of two students and two academic staff members to attend a Students as Partners Change Institute at McMaster University in Canada. While the academics knew each other, and the students knew each other, we were essentially a team of strangers, jumping on a plane to cross the world and figure out some possibilities for extending our university's students as partners repertoire.

Our team sought to enact a partnership approach based on the Māori concept of *ako*, which means both to teach and to learn. We would all be learning from and teaching each other—in partnership. We laid out our expectations for partnership at our first meeting: it would be equitable, the administrative load would be shared, and we would recognize and draw on each other's strengths and expertise (once we knew what those were!). We committed to rotating tasks such as setting dates and chairing meetings, taking notes, identifying readings, and sharing the load of investigating flight and accommodation options. All this worked well before and during the Change Institute. But when we returned and the rubber hit the road in terms of getting our research project rolling, the partnership became somewhat less equal, though hopefully still equitable. We reflect on the challenges and thrills from that partnership later in this chapter. First, we briefly describe the project we undertook and some preliminary findings from our research on civically engaged curricula.

Victoria's 2017-2021 Learning & Teaching Strategy/Te Rautaki Maruako includes the aspirational goal that "all graduates will have the opportunity to participate in civic engagement and/or experiential learning" (10). Both civic engagement and experiential learning are described by Kuh (2008) as high-impact pedagogies that dramatically enhance student learning. Before implementing such practices on a wide scale, we aimed to celebrate what was already successful and learn from those engaged in such high-impact practices. Victoria staff who

had demonstrated a commitment to embedding civic engagement in the curriculum were interviewed at micro (course), meso (program or Faculty), and macro (university) levels. With the help of a PhD student who joined our team as a research assistant, we conducted nine interviews: two pilots (to practice interviewing and test our questions); three with individual lecturers; three with six program/Faculty leaders; and one with a former senior leader. Our findings, shared below in poetic form, provide insights into the enablers and barriers for introducing and sustaining civically-engaged curricula. The poem is composed entirely from the words of our interviewees. All interviews are represented in the poem, which captures some of the key themes that came through in our research: voice and identity; outsiders and subversion; fear and risk-taking; and time and labour.

### **Embedding Civic Engagement in Curricula: Challenges, Joys, and Possibilities**

*A poem composed from the words of our research participants*

Civically engaged curricula . . .

*treat* the classroom as a civic space,  
 bringing people in and sending  
 students out into the broader community;

*recognize* that the young people  
 we have in our universities are themselves  
 active citizens, with their own voices;

*ask* of students,

“What are your biases?

How do you interact with your discipline?

How do you interact with society?”;

*share* what the students from last year’s cohorts discovered;

*enable* students to respond to real issues in a client organisation;

*encourage* critique of power structures and ask,

“Well, is this normal?”

Should it be this way?  
 Why should it *not* be this way?"

If it's not pedagogically grounded  
 in students' learning, then it's just  
 volunteering.

Civically engaged lecturers . . .

*take risks*

It felt precarious  
 and like really carving out new territory,  
 so it had to be good because  
 it could be attacked  
 or undermined  
 or go terribly wrong;

*encourage students to take risks*

I'm not going to let students be  
 complacent or take things for granted,  
 students get shaken up;

*manage risks*

You're dealing with people's lives  
 and agendas  
 and the reputation of the university  
 and students' well-being;

*build relationships*

People encourage *me*  
 to experiment and  
 find my own voice and  
 my own way—and that's  
 what I encourage others to do.

Civically engaged universities . . .

*show sympathetic leadership and*  
 are positively disposed toward community involvement;

*ensure* the student body is itself diverse;  
*keep* a handle on what's going on and  
don't exhaust the capacity of their collaborators;  
*develop* policy AND support grassroots initiatives;  
*wedge* open doors and show others the possibilities.

Civic engagement *thrives on goodwill*, and we fear that's not sustainable:  
Here's me on my hamster wheel chasing the cheese . . .  
I felt like I was flapping in the wind . . .  
I don't want to rock the boat.

Civic engagement *welcomes naïve interventions* from outsiders:  
I was completely unaware of the system,  
which was a strength because  
if you knew about it, you'd  
never do it  
because it's just so terrifying.

Civic engagement *takes courage*:  
I really ruffled some people's feathers . . .  
worked in the edginess . . .  
took an alternative approach which is a bit controversial.

Civic engagement *needs adequate resourcing*:  
these initiatives require more investment than traditional courses . . .  
there was an assumption that  
a student would want to do this for free . . .  
either it's a flop and it stops,  
or it's a success and we scale it up, and we can then  
find funding sources we weren't able to find before.

Civic engagement does not need *to keep everybody happy*:  
the risk is that you end up with something which is  
the lowest common denominator.

Civic engagement does not need *institutional inertia*:  
we could grow a whole lot faster if it wasn't for



certain rules and restrictions;  
 we keep getting pushback.  
 Civic engagement does not need *cumbersome bureaucracy*:  
 not to “dis” on this university, but  
 it’s a really different culture and  
 if it’s too many forms to fill out,  
 I just don’t deal well.  
 It’s like turning around a battleship.

At the end of a course where we have  
 encouraged students to be curious citizens, it’s not  
 just another crazy exercise.  
 Instead,  
 afterwards,  
 students are like

“Oh, actually maybe there’s a little more to this world than I thought.”

The poem outlines the challenges and opportunities for incorporating civic engagement into the curriculum. Now, we show how our partnership process mirrored some of the same themes.

### **Voice and Identity: “You’re dealing with people’s lives”**

Any students as partners project exposes the tension between equality and equity. One key observation is that a partnership project does not have to ensure *equality* between student and staff partners: that is unachievable (students do not have offices to host meetings in, academics do; students do not always get paid, academics do; research is not always a requirement of undergraduate study, but it is required of academics). Students as partners processes can, however, be *equitable*. This requires deliberate recognition of voice, identity, power, and privilege by all parties. Academic partners are not solely responsible for this, although, given their resource privilege, it is important academics acknowledge and own this responsibility where necessary. To manage these issues, partnerships must ensure that the voices of all parties are recognized.

In our partnership, Brad, Emma, and Isabella, as students, reflected that not only did they have plenty of opportunities to speak, but they also felt heard and included in all decisions.

Our students as partners approach made space (unintentionally and then deliberately) for the naïve voice. As undergraduate students, Brad and Isabella had no experience with educational research methods and would ask questions such as whether deviating from the interview questions was possible, and how the ethics process worked. This naïveté, in turn, made Kathryn, Marc, and Emma question things they took for granted, both in terms of how academic institutions work, under the institutional hood where students may not get to look, for example, as well as under the metaphorical hood(ies) of the students.

### **Outsiders and Subversion: “If you knew about it beforehand, you’d never do it because it’s just so terrifying”**

We all felt like outsiders at different points in our project—not knowing each other to begin with, not knowing the literature, not having done interviews before, not being an academic, not being a student, not having been on the team from the beginning. As indicated above, the naïve voice of the “outsider” can raise probing questions and challenge what others may take for granted. One tension was around the delayed outcomes of the research project. Both Brad and Isabella are active members in undergraduate student politics and were keen to see the findings of the research disseminated or implemented in ways that would immediately benefit students. The project’s extended timeline led us to question at times whether we were involved in research for the sake of output rather than transformation.

The students as partners process (much like the civic engagement initiatives of our participants) can work to subvert the normal way of operating within the university. Not only are students and academics separated by barriers of age, power, and role, but we are also isolated by different disciplines. Forming interdisciplinary connections is not always facilitated by institutional structures, nor is forming links between undergraduate students, postgraduate students, and academic staff from

different Faculties. The subversive potential of bringing together people from different backgrounds and finding a way to honor their perspectives is an exciting element of students as partners work.

Our team had not worked together before, and none of us were experts in the area of civic engagement. While this posed challenges (such as the time burden of reading up on new concepts), we believe our naiveté (shared and individual) was a strength. Our experience never actually matched the “terror” implied in the poem and this section’s subtitle, but there were challenges we did not foresee. Naiveté can be a strength when it frees you from expectations about how things *should* work. Our naiveté has meant we have been able to construct our own version of the students as partners model and learn and adapt along the way.

### **Fear and Risk-taking: “It felt precarious”**

The student as partners process can be risky for all involved, but it also presents opportunities for challenging assumptions, both personal and collective. One challenge we collectively reflected on was differing assumptions about knowledge and experience. Kathryn noted, for example, that she made assumptions about the undergraduate students’ knowledge based on their maturity: because they seemed older than their years, she assumed they knew more than their three years at university had taught them. Meanwhile, Brad and Isabella noted that, while it was nice to be asked for their opinion and invited to make decisions, without prior knowledge of how the research would unfold (let alone the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the process), they were ill-equipped to even begin to answer. Kathryn assumed the role of keeping the project on track but feared that her leadership decisions could be construed as dictatorial and that she was compromising the partnership philosophy. As new territory for all of us, it was sometimes scary realizing how much we had to learn about each other and about the process.

### **Time and Labour: “Don’t exhaust the capacity”**

Embarking on projects between academics and students requires commitment and time—commodities in scarce supply for both parties. We often struggled to find time for the project among our other work—it was always a secondary consideration after our other engagements. Kathryn and Marc, as academics, had their regular teaching to attend to, alongside their usual, subject-specific research endeavors and service commitments. Brad, Emma, and Isabella had their own classes or research to undertake—for which they were paying—alongside a host of other activities including paid work and social or extracurricular activities. Our project became the task that would be pushed back first.

Compounding the fact that the project took longer to complete than anticipated was the lack of clarity regarding how work should be divided. A tension existed between us requiring guidelines and deadlines to be formulated, and the desire not to boss others around. Yet such deadlines and guidelines are a critical component of success—without these, no one is clear on the path forward or the future body of work involved. Others looking to embark on their own partnership adventures would be wise to consider the desirability of forming a team with motivated but busy individuals who have competing commitments, or remunerating individuals to devote their attention solely to the task. Although the popular adage opines, “If you want something done, give it to a busy person,” balancing this against those who can do the project justice is also a critical factor.

### **Ako in Action**

As our poem illustrates, opportunities abound for engagement within and across the university, and beyond. We are all too often isolated in silos of Schools and Faculties, undergraduates and postgraduates, staff and students. But one of the joys and possibilities of a students as partners approach is that it harnesses connections within the university and reveals the possibilities for transformative, critical, and civic engagement not just *beyond* the university but also *within*; it is an exciting counterpoint to institutional inertia. Students as partners offers a way to “walk the talk” of civic engagement by breaking down barriers across the university,

fostering connection and community, and allowing collaborative endeavors. Our students as partners experience afforded us the opportunity to learn from *and* to teach each other, in a wonderful expression of *akoranga* and reciprocity. We have chosen, in the creation of a new partnership program for the university, not to use the terminology “students as partners” but instead to name our nascent program *Ako in Action*, to reflect the equal nature of the partnership. Students do not have to assume a new identity “as partners” to participate in our new program: everyone involved does, academic staff included. In the section below, we conclude our chapter by posing some questions for anyone considering embarking on such a partnership project.

### Reflection Questions for Readers

- Collective reflections can be side-lined in a rush to get to the “real” business. How have you carved out time for reflection?
- Team leaders may struggle with the challenges of making decisions and the fear of railroading other team members. What might be the benefits and drawbacks of nominating a leader to manage group time?
- How will you tackle power dynamics?

### References

- Boland, Josephine. 2014. “Orientations to Civic Engagement: Insights into the Sustainability of a Challenging Pedagogy.” *Studies in Higher Education* 39 (1): 180-95. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.648177>.
- Brown, Kim, Kerry Shephard, David Warren, Gala Hesson, and Jean Fleming. 2016. “Using Phenomenography to Build an Understanding of How University People Conceptualise their Community-Engaged Activities.” *Higher Education Research & Development*, 35 (4): 643-57. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2015.1137880>.
- Kuh, George. 2008. *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter*. Washington: AAC&U.

- Marullo, Sam, and Bob Edwards. 2000. "From Charity to Justice: The Potential of University-Community Collaboration for Social Change." *American Behavioral Scientist* 43, no. 5 (February): 895-912. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027640021955540>.
- New Zealand Government. 1989. Education Act, No. 80. <http://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/1989/0080/latest/DLM183668.html>.
- Victoria University of Wellington. 2014. "Victoria University of Wellington Strategic Plan." <https://www.victoria.ac.nz/documents/policy/strategies/strategic-plan.pdf>.
- Victoria University of Wellington. 2017. "Learning and Teaching Strategy: Te Rautaki Maruako 2017-2012." <https://www.victoria.ac.nz/documents/policy/strategies/learning-teaching-strategy.pdf>.
- Wood, Bronwyn, and Andrea Milligan. 2016. "Citizenship Education in New Zealand: Policy and Practice." *Policy Quarterly* 12, no. 3 (August): 65-73. <https://doi.org/10.26686/pq.v12i3.4599>.