

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

©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 6

A Partnership Mindset

Students as Partners in and Beyond the Academy

Tai Peseta

Senior lecturer

Western Sydney University
Australia

Jenny Pizzica

Senior lecturer

Western Sydney University
Australia

Ashley Beathe

21C student curriculum partner

Western Sydney University
Australia

Chinnu Jose

21C student curriculum partner

Western Sydney University
Australia

Racquel Lynch

Former 21C student partner

Western Sydney University
Australia

Marisse Manthos

21C student curriculum partner

Western Sydney University
Australia

Kathy Nguyen

Former 21C student partner

Western Sydney University
Australia

Hassan Raza

21C student curriculum partner

Western Sydney University
Australia

The Students as Partners (SAP) literature is flooded with case after case from around the world of students, staff, practices, and institutions being transformed by authentic encounters of pedagogical partnership. We read narratives of students genuinely astonished that staff seek out their perspectives and act on them in some way that improves the student experience (Peseta et al. 2016; Bell et al. 2017). We come to learn that

staff are reenergized by the thoughtfulness students display about their learning and education more broadly, despite the circling of contested SAP understandings and agendas (Sabri 2011; Matthews et al. 2018). We understand that there are significant learning gains for students when they are engaged in partnership initiatives in ways that are consequential to their futures. Students engage with their studies differently—with more agency—and start to see themselves as part of the university community. In many ways, these are precisely the kinds of educational and developmental outcomes that advocates of SAP are interested in disseminating more widely, despite the suggestion that SAP is better conceived as an ethos rather than a set of outcomes (Healey, Flint, and Harrington 2014). Taken together, these insights add compelling nuance to the evidence base for not only continuing SAP initiatives but also for scaling up these schemes for richer and thicker impact.

While acknowledging the transformative possibilities in the “powerful SAP narrative,” in this chapter, we aim to push the scholarly conversation in a slightly different direction. In many ways, the SAP curriculum initiative we describe here as part of our work together at Western Sydney University (hereafter, Western) is entirely of the routine kind described above: staff, students, and additional partners toiling together in ways where they teach each other their version of the university through the mechanism of curriculum-making and renewal. Collaborative decision-making and opportunities for challenge, co-creation, and reciprocity are all apparent in the SAP initiative that has brought us into partnership. In addition to much of the literature about student voice, agency, and partnership (Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten 2014; Matthews 2016; Dunne and Zandstra 2011), our approach is influenced by Williams’s (2008) notion, “teach the university.” For Williams (2008, 26) and us, “study of the university enjoins students to consider reflexively the ways and means of the world they are in, and what it does to and for them.” This is one of our points of departure from other SAP initiatives (note: the other departure is that, at Western, partnership extends beyond students and staff). An important aspiration for our SAP scheme is that *the university as an idea and institution* (Barnett 2013, 2016) becomes an object of inquiry and curiosity for students. Yet our

insular focus on the university points to a conundrum that appears to have been insufficiently attended to in the existing SAP literature: how do we trace the imprint of SAP schemes onto the complex and multiple lives students inhabit *outside* the university?

Our goal, through interrogating our own SAP curriculum initiative, is to follow how student partners themselves notice the effects of SAP among the workplaces, communities, and families within which they live and labor. We emphasize how a “partnership mindset” is emerging as a feature in students’ accounts of their lives outside the academy.

The Western Sydney University Context: 21st Century Curriculum Project

Western, like many universities, has embarked on a program of strategic institution-wide curriculum renewal known as the 21st Century Curriculum project (hereafter, 21C). At the heart of 21C is the concept of “partnership pedagogy,” oriented toward the challenges of the future of work and society (Barrie and Pizzica 2019). Our partnership pedagogy comprises four co-creation stages—co-design, co-development, co-delivery, and co-credentialing—and three values—interdisciplinarity, interdependence, and integrity (Pizzica 2018). The idea is that the design of a 21st century university curriculum (and education) can no longer be the province of universities alone. Amid the rush to consider the potentially disruptive implications (and opportunities) in the future of work (PWC 2014; FYA 2017), contemporary university curricula require partnerships of all kinds. At Western, 21C is encouraging partnerships with the Greater Western Sydney community, professional business associations, our university network partners, industry, commercial providers, edu-venture partners, our research institutes, and most importantly, our students. The 21C project has set in motion a variety of strategies and tactics to advance these educational ambitions. First, it funded several pilot projects intended for Schools within Western to scope more flexible curriculum structures and course architectures as well as identify opportunities for partnership pedagogy at scale. Second, 21C facilitated a series of future of work and society curriculum disruption forums intended to give staff, partners, and students a space to deliberate on the

research about the future of work and its implications for curriculum. Third, 21C funded proposals that promised an innovative approach to the development of partnership pedagogy curriculum and supported that work through a series of Curriculum MakerSpaces. Finally, it offered a mechanism to acknowledge and recognize the labors of these staff via the Western Educational Fellowship Scheme. Our student curriculum partners have been intimately involved in each of these phases of 21C work—puzzling over the challenges of partnership, their roles and identities, the precise nature of their expertise, and their interactions with academics, and forming views about how our University is engaging them in this conversation. It is this suite of initiatives that form the backdrop to our reflections on the partnership mindset.

On Developing a Partnership Mindset

The idea of a partnership mindset emerged organically from our conversations in preparing for our 21C work together. The academics—Tai and Jenny—have been working with our student partners—Ashley, Kathy, Chinnu, Marisse, Hassan, and Racquel—to interrogate our experiences of what partnership looks like outside the university context and our curriculum conversations together. Specifically, the concept of “partnership mindset” emerged from a story Hassan told us in one of our sessions about how he was beginning to see himself less as an “employee” (in his weekend pharmacy job) and more as a partner who was invested in the success of the business. It struck us that this “outside the university” context was worth exploring together.

Hassan: It is through being a 21C student partner that I have cultivated the partnership mindset that I now actively apply on a day-to-day basis within and outside of being a student. By partnership mindset, I mean carrying with me the unapologetic mentality of looking to develop genuine partnerships with individuals I come across every day. This mindset has enabled me to enjoy aspects of my life a lot more because I recognize what I bring to the table. At the university, this might be in the way I work with other students on a group assessment task or with university staff to develop future curriculum. Outside the university, I

have become a lot more confident in my weekend job at a local pharmacy in bringing my knowledge into my workplace environment. Rather than clocking on in the morning and being eager to leave in the afternoon, I try to engage with the environment and give active suggestions regarding enhancement. I recently listened in on a conversation (more like a rant) between the pharmacist and the manager about how they should be cautious about hiring additional students with no direct interest in pharmacy. While acknowledging that I was an exception among their pool of student employees, they stated that the others just “simply don’t care.” This struck me as surprising as there is nothing particularly extraordinary about me compared to the other students, except perhaps my role as a student partner. It is my view that this partnership mindset can work for a graduate no matter their field or the future they aspire to. A student will likely learn and appreciate their own value, and not settle for the slave-like “just do what you’re told” environment of casual work that afflicts many students. My student partner role is a big part (if not the cause) of this mentality.

Ashley: Becoming a 21C student partner has opened my eyes to the power and possibilities of collaborative partnership. As an education student, I am naturally interested in the curriculum. However, it wasn’t until I became a student partner that I could delve into the inner workings of higher education and my own University. For the first time, I’ve had the opportunity to engage in conversation with students, staff, academics, industry and community partners to see first-hand the benefit of true collaboration. The role has allowed me to enter into local, regional, and international conversations in ways that have not only benefited my current studies but have also influenced the way I approach my employment both in and out of the university. These curriculum co-creation conversations have taught me how to negotiate unfamiliar territory with academics and build networks within and outside the university, and I am beginning to hold my own in curriculum decision-making. I have sharpened how I listen. I am starting to appreciate more fully the depth of knowledge and experience that individuals bring with them to the co-creation table, and I feel my own creativity and confidence growing

too. I believe I will apply this partnership mindset to any career path I choose. For now, I can see the distinct value it will add to my future teaching practice.

Chinnu: My goal when I started university was to get out as quick as I could with that all-important piece of paper. I wanted to be a criminal lawyer and that was it! Now my goal is to make the best of being a student and be open to partnerships and opportunities. No job title restricts me as long as I'm doing something meaningful and worthwhile. This drastic change of mindset is largely due to my role as a 21C student partner. By working in partnership with academics, I've gained valuable experiences that have empowered me to recognize that there is more to me and my role. No one is *just* a student or *just* an employee. Whether it's in my profession or life generally, everything has become influenced by a partnership mindset. In situations where I have needed to put my problem-solving skills to work, I focus on mutual respect and try to ensure that all parties benefit in some way. A partnership mindset has become a critical part of how I see my volunteer work at my local church youth group. I know that *being a student* is the expertise I bring to the table as a partner. Similarly, each person in my youth group has a unique skill set too, one that I had failed to fully appreciate before my student partner role. This partnership mindset has made me value the importance of my own unique perspective—an awareness that's both enriching and empowering.

Racquel: As a mature aged student—one who'd experienced university more than twenty-five years ago, had a career and family, and then decided to pursue my passion—I will admit to having a very “us and them” mindset about the divide between academics and students. Exposure to the very idea of partnership pedagogy and SAP was foreign to me. It was a learning curve for us during the first few months. I didn't feel the intimidation that my fellow SAPs would often verbalize when we started. What I felt was a need to “make” academics understand the value of my input as a *current* student. The experiences of participating in the program have, however, developed in me a partnership mindset. What does that look like for me? How has it translated into other areas

of my life? I have already learned a lot over the years about working as a team, both at work and in my family life. I am in partnerships in many areas of my life. What I realized is that, when in an institutional setting, I still seemed to have a hierarchical mindset. I had a leader/follower, teacher/student way of seeing. Through the 21C project, I have come to see that my views, experiences, and opinions can and do sway those that are implementing educational innovations at the University. And I see the translation of a partnership mindset to my other roles as well. I am more able to work with my laboratory leaders so that my contribution is more meaningful. In my volunteer positions, I understand that my opinion, even when I am not in a position of power, is valuable. And I can be in a truer partnership with my family. I can see how the work we are doing aims to cultivate authentic and meaningful partnerships, and I see more clearly how I am contributing as a change-maker to nurture a partnership mindset throughout the University.

Marisse: Being a 21C student partner has been (and continues to be) an enriching experience. How? It is enriching because, in being a student partner, I no longer turn up to Uni to listen to the lecture, then go to the tutorial, and finally, head home with the same mindset. Instead, I arrive at Uni with thoughts like: *Why is my learning guided this way? I've seen that learning objective before, but I don't know what it means. Why do we have a student placement in the middle of the semester?* It's questions like these—the day-to-day ones—that underpin my experiences. But the SAP initiative begs the question: who is the “student” not only inside the university but outside? Listening to others in our everyday lives—to diverse experiences—adds something valuable not only to the perceptions we have of ourselves but also the people we are listening to. Since joining the SAP conversation, I have realized just how much I use the skills I have learned in everyday life. I currently work at a high school in the afternoons where I mentor students. A lot of my afternoon is listening to students—listening to their explanations of being stressed, their questions, their discussions, their insights. I thought “listening” was a sign that I wasn't talking enough, perhaps not doing my job well enough. I have realized that truly listening is exactly what I should be

doing. I was a student at school once, just like the students I mentor, and I remember having to digest information (almost too much to swallow) throughout the school day. When I saw myself as equal to the students, rather than being the one to provide all the information, the students began driving their own learning and discussions. This is exactly how I feel by being in the SAP conversation. When I listen to these high school students, I discover the diversity in the room, and I recognize how different all these students are, which helps me to partner with them in meaningful and beneficial ways for all of us. Finally, I must return to this “enriching” idea of SAP—student partners will not only become better students at university, but they will also collect skills that are transferable into alternate settings outside of the university—skills that a lecture or tutorial cannot give you.

Kathy: As both a student and a university staff member, I often view my work and study as two separate parts of the same institution. I have held many casual jobs at the university, yet it is in my role as a 21C student partner where I am collaborating with academics and senior staff and contributing to effective student-staff relationships. I have gained more confidence in working in an organization with complex hierarchies. The experience has changed the way I communicate with others. It has helped me recognize the diversity of background and status of individuals in those conversations, and it has encouraged me to make those conversations productive. Perhaps it is my age and experience, but the chance to be a 21C student partner has been one of the most rewarding and impactful projects that I have been part of. I feel a sense of empowerment and pride in being at the forefront of representing student opinions and making change at the university, and this carries over into the other employee roles I have at the institution too. One of the best things I have taken away from the SAP experience is the sense of empowerment, pride, and confidence in all aspects of my life, but most notably in my work within the university, as it gives me a new outlook on my role within the sector.

Closing Reflection

We are only just beginning to notice and explore the emergence of a partnership mindset or disposition. Even in its nascent stages, the partnership mindset is there in the way we notice a more open engagement with colleagues and clients in our workplaces. It is there in the ways we value the difference and diversity people bring to conversations. It is there in how we are expanding from an “us/them” mentality between students and academics to one of genuine inquiry. It is there in the way we have started to recognize that we have a responsibility to use our agency wisely, no matter the context. And the partnership mindset is there in the way we carry ourselves in the world. These are substantial realizations that have, in many ways, been deeply profound.

The next step for our student curriculum partnership initiative at Western is to conceptualize how we become more mindful, inclusive, and design-focused on growing a partnership mindset in the way we communicate the rationale for our work and its likely effects on students’ lives outside the university. This is an important narrative that can revitalize models of SAP so that it is more expansive than those which focus on power dynamics inside the university (important as that is) to include the idea of “partnership mindset,” which gives universities yet another way of telling a story about its inherent social purpose. Perhaps most importantly, it is likely our students who are going to be the best advocates of working in partnership with others.

Reflection Questions for Readers

- What other examples of the “partnership mindset” beyond universities are in the SAP literature?
- How do we design SAP models and programs that help us to wrestle with, theorize about, and trace their impact outside our university communities?
- To what extent might narratives from employers/families/communities—i.e., those outside the university—help us to demonstrate the impact of SAP beyond the university? Is this an important argument for universities to be able to make empirically?

- If you have been involved in SAP, how have those experiences translated into aspects of your life outside of the university context? If you haven't been involved in SAP, what other learning from university do you see influencing your daily life in other contexts?

References

- Barnett, Ronald. 2013. *Imagining the University*. New York: Routledge.
- Barnett, Ronald. 2016. *Understanding the University*. New York: Routledge.
- Barrie, Simon, and Jenny Pizzica. 2019. "Reimagining University Curriculum for a Disrupted Future of Work: Partnership Pedagogy." In *Education for Employability: Learning for Future Possibilities (Volume 2)*, edited by Joy Higgs, Will Lets, and Geoffrey Crisp, 143-52. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense-Brill Publishers.
- Bell, Amani, Tai Peseta, Stephanie Barahona, Suji Jeong, Longen Lan, Rosemary Menzies, Tracy Trieu, and Ann Wen. 2017. "In Conversation Together: Student Ambassadors for Cultural Competence." *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education* 21: 1-8. <http://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss21/5>.
- Cook-Sather, Alison, Cathy Bovill, and Peter Felten. 2014. *Engaging Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching: A Guide for Faculty*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Dunne, Elisabeth, and Roos Zandstra. 2011. *Students as Change Agents: New Ways of Engaging with Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*. Bristol, UK: ESCalate, HEA Subject Centre for Education. <http://escalate.ac.uk/downloads/8242.pdf>.
- Foundation for Young Australians (FYA). 2017. "The New Work Smarts: Thriving in the New Work Order." <https://www.fya.org.au/report/the-new-work-smarts/>.
- Healey, Mick, Abbi Flint, and Kathy Harrington. 2014. *Engagement through Partnership: Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education*. York, UK: Higher Education Academy. <https://www.>

heacademy.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/engagement-through-partnership-students-partners-learning-and-teaching-higher.

Matthews, Kelly. 2016. "Students as Partners as the Future of Student Engagement." *Student Engagement in Higher Education* 1(1): 1-5. <https://sehej.raise-network.com/raise/article/view/380>.

Matthews, Kelly, Alexander Dwyer, Lorelei Hine, and Jarred Turner. 2018. "Conceptions of Students as Partners." *Higher Education* 76, no. 6 (December): 957-71. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-018-0257-y>.

Peseta, Tai, Amani Bell, Amanda Clifford, Annette English, Jananie Janarthana, Chelsea Jones, Matthew Teal, and Jessica Zhang. 2016. "Students as Ambassadors and Researchers of Assessment Renewal: Puzzling over the Practices of University and Academic Life." *The International Journal for Academic Development* 21 (1): 54-66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2015.1115406>.

Pizzica, Jenny. 2018. "Partnership Pedagogy." Resource from the 21st Century Curriculum Project Learning Transformations Western Sydney University. https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/1445289/PP2_pager_v2.1_120818.pdf.

Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC). 2014. "The Future of Work: A Journey to 2022." <https://www.pwc.com.au/pdf/future-of-work-report-v23.pdf>.

Sabri, Duna. 2011. "What's Wrong with 'The Student Experience?'" *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 32, no. 5 (December): 657-67. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2011.620750>.

Williams, Jeffrey J. 2008. "Teach the University." *Pedagogy* 8, no. 1 (Winter): 25-42. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/229021/pdf>.