

Bokrecension

Engaging Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching: A Guide for Faculty. Alison Cook-Sather, Catherine Bovill, and Peter Felten. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2014, ISBN 978-1-11843458-1

How could teachers and students work together in order to enhance teaching and learning in higher education? How might students contribute to course development in a truly cooperative manner that goes beyond the information usually provided by course evaluations? *Engaging Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching* addresses questions like these by offering a theoretical framework as well as practical advice. Targeting mainly teachers, but also institutional leaders and academic developers, this book argues for an approach where learning is seen as a shared responsibility between students and teachers. But engaging students as partners, the authors maintain, is more of an orientation and ethos rather than a new teaching technique with a great potential to become a transformative learning experience for both parts: students and teachers. The fundamental goal of this approach is to kindle student engagement and passion, involving and giving responsibility to the entire higher education community to make learning spaces more dynamic. As academic developers and student assistants working with active student participation at Uppsala University, we welcome this profound introduction and guide to student-faculty partnerships that, as the authors highlight, is challenging existing norms concerning teaching and learning in higher education for both students and faculty.

The book starts with a short background of the authors' own motivations for partnership and their various experiences with it as teachers, academic developers, and researchers placed in different Anglo-American institutional contexts. In the following chapters, the authors clarify their foundations of a partnership approach emphasizing respect, responsibility, and reciprocity as being fundamental. Thus, partnership means a mutual agreement to listen to and learn from each other, acknowledging each other's different roles, where students are enabled to contribute particularly with their expertise and insights as learners within their subject fields. Furthermore, we learn about what partnership can look like and how it operates in different contexts through narratives of students and faculty in numerous universities, mostly in the US and UK.

Examples include students being invited as curriculum consultants in an engineering ethics class to students composing multiple-choice questions on an online platform for their peers as part of a co-created examination process. These authentic and inspiring examples cover a wide range of subjects, course levels, and grades of student involvement due to the authors' ambition to give inspiration and advice for small-scale approaches as well as more radical ones. Therefore, readers might recognize some of the examples as student-activating methods that they already use in their teaching, but also realize that there is much more to explore. The authors do an outstanding job of addressing preliminary questions about student-faculty partnerships, why should anyone engage with this in the first place? For example, the authors raise questions such as: how can students, who are not experts in the field of study, be legitimate informants of improving teaching? Or, why should teachers change their practice if the students are already learning effectively? They also cover the outcomes and how to evaluate them as well as attending to the challenges and risks of this work. The sensitivity of this book to context disallows generalizability but enriches the validity of the specific narratives and the lessons learned from each case.

Perhaps the most important part of the book discusses the engagement, awareness, and enhancement outcomes for students and faculty. By connecting with previous pedagogical research, they clearly outline the pedagogical benefits as well as the ethical imperative to transition away from the routines in current higher education. They outline benefits such as, students ‘demonstrate higher levels of engagement and stronger sense of community within a course’, students ‘take more responsibility for their own learning and for the performance of their peers’, and students ‘achieve deeper understanding’ (p.39). Importantly, from many of the examples given throughout the book, outcomes have included the development of citizenship skills and democratic capacities of students, which is facilitated by the process of including students in decision-making processes in a meaningful way, making their education more self-determined and co-created: ‘Partnership work gives students an opportunity to engage in democratic practices as well as democratic ways of being’ (p.128). As such, one must have a clear purpose when initiating and working in partnership; a pure focus on results will not serve well in this work, while it is the process which is the most important element.

Engaging Students as Partners in Learning and Teaching connects to an international movement which aims to debunk the construction of students as consumers. It is a strong voice in this movement, putting a critical eye on how and where students are involved in higher education, placing this work in the tradition of authors such as Dewey and Freire. Faculty in higher education in Sweden engaged in working for an education that is a shared responsibility between staff and students may find this a read which awakens important questions: When and where are we truly listening to the student voice? How can students help faculty explore and critically reflect on learning and teaching? Crucially, the authors argue that student voice and engagement should not be limited to student representation on different committees and unions, but emphasize that ‘this perspective misses the enormous potential for partnership between students and faculty in diverse teaching and learning contexts’ (p.141). This is, therefore, of extra importance in a Swedish context, where student representation is well established while student-faculty partnership, in a pedagogical context, is a territory worth exploring more deeply.

Even if the book is focused on the US and UK higher education institutional cultures, the tips and examples are not meant to be taken verbatim, only adjusted and customized according to student and faculty needs and purpose. While the book is impressively thorough about most topics, we would have liked to see a more in depth discussion about the aspect of student inclusion, which, from a Swedish perspective, may be one of the most important reasons to engage with student partnership.

In sum, we would like to stress that this book is an insightful, humble, and balanced account of student-faculty partnerships. It is not only a must read for faculty at all levels and disciplines whom have an interest in improving their teaching by working together with students, but it also might be useful for students who are curious about a deeper engagement. By presenting and exploring this new kind of collegiality between teachers and students, it addresses the true purpose of higher education and requires faculty to ask themselves the question, why teach?

Susanna Barrineau, Student Assistant
ASP, Uppsala University”

E-post: sanna.barrineau@csduppsala.uu.se

Alexis Engström, Student Assistant
ASP, Uppsala University

Ulrike Schnaas, Academic Developer, Project leader ASP,
Uppsala University

1 The university-wide project “Continuous Development of Active Student Participation”.